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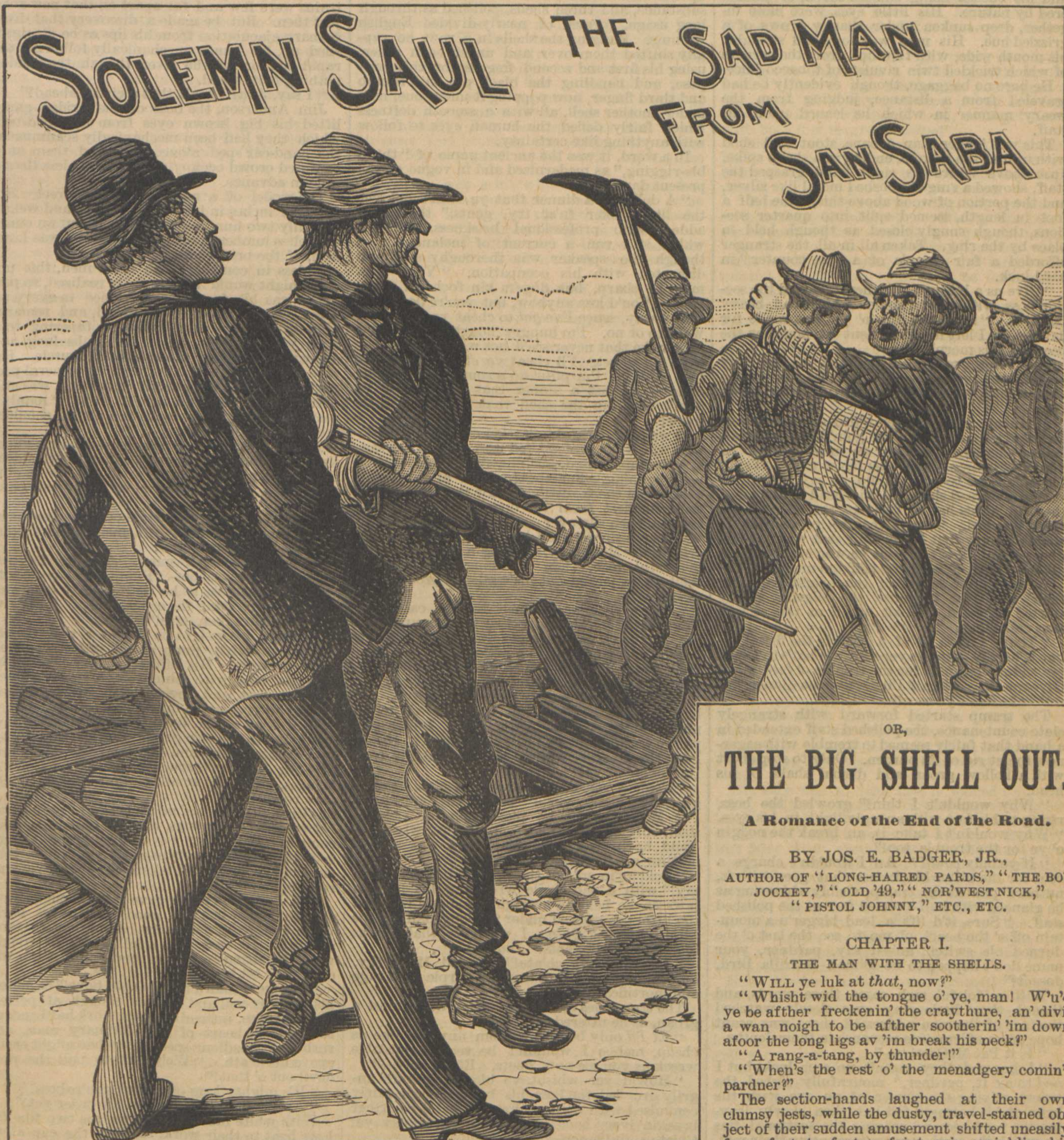
Vol. XXXIX.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., June 20, 1888.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 504



ONLY FOR THE SAD-FACED TRAMP, THE BRIDGE BOSS WOULD HAVE FARED BADLY,
SINCE THE GLEAMING PICK WAS WHIRLING STRAIGHT FOR HIS BROAD CHEST.

OR, THE BIG SHELL OUT.

A Romance of the End of the Road.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "THE BOY
JOCKEY," "OLD '49," "NOR'WEST NICK,"
"PISTOL JOHNNY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WITH THE SHELLS.

"WILL ye luk at *that*, now?"
"Whisht wid the tongue o' ye, man! W'u'd
ye be afther freckenin' the craythure, an' divil
a wan noigh to be afther sootherin' 'im down
afoor the long ligs av 'im break his neck?"
"A rang-a-tang, by thunder!"
"When's the rest o' the menadgery comin',
pardner?"

The section-hands laughed at their own
clumsy jests, while the dusty, travel-stained ob-
ject of their sudden amusement shifted uneasily
from foot to foot, a faint grin wrinkling his
lantern-jaws, but with far more of fright than
amusement in his little gray eyes. He paused

in his weary tramp, and even shrunk back a pace or two as though strongly tempted to seek safety in flight.

"Aisy, ye flannel-mouths!" cried a broad-shouldered man of middle-age who was seated a little apart from the rest as he munched his dinner. "Don't ye see it's the president o' the road, come to inspect the style o' our work? Manners to ye, boss?"

"Same to you, pardner," nodded the seeming tramp, leaning on his stout staff and mechanically licking his lips as he glanced from one to another of the liberally supplied dinner pails. "Don't reckon any o' you gents is too sick fer to git away with all his grub? Ain't no chauce fer a critter o' my size an' make fer to git a job o' scrapin' out them buckets, is they? Nur even to pick up sech crumbs as mebbe you mought hev dropped, onbeknown?"

There was an almost pitiful pretense at gayety in his words, but his eyes were almost ravenous as they lingered on the edibles, and the tip of his tongue repeatedly moistened his thin lips. Judging from this, it had been many a long hour since he had appeased his hunger.

Tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered, looking little better than a bundle of bones and sinew in his dusty, faded garb of flannel-shirt, copper-riveted overalls, stogy boots and storm-beaten felt hat which kept falling over his face, to be tossed back by a peculiar flit of his head.

Straggling locks of tow-colored hair almost touched his shoulders, though the growth was thin and scanty. From his long, pointed chin, depended a slender tuft of beard, his upper lip and his cheeks being smooth-shorn, or uncovered by nature. His little eyes were close together, deep sunken under shaggy brows of a grizzled hue. His nose was long and straight, his mouth wide, with thin lips, from the corners of which trickled twin rivulets of tobacco-juice.

He bore no baggage, though evidently he had traveled from a distance, judging from the weary manner in which he leaned upon his staff.

This was longer than a cane, stout and shod with iron at the bottom, ending in a sharp spike. Just above where his right hand grasped the staff, showed a ring of polished metal like silver, and the portion of wood above this, some half a foot in length, seemed split into quarter sections, though snugly closed as though held in place by the ring. Taken all in all, the stranger afforded a fair sample of a "tie counter" in hard luck.

"Give us a bit av a jig then," nodded the section boss, with a grim smile on his broad, heavy features. "Sure, the fut o' ye was made for dancin', or I left me judgment at home on the peeanny this morn'!"

The rough workmen laughed, as in duty bound, and none the less because the tramp shrunk back with a look of doleful horror, gasping:

"Dance? Me? Sorrer b'iled down to never-endin' grief. Jig? An' me goin' blind with salt tears o' shame an' sufferin' an' miseryation! Ef you only knowed—but you never will! 'Tain't fer sech as me to—dance, did ye say, pardner?" with a slow, sad shake of his head that caused the brim of his hat to flap like the wings of a rusty buzzard. "But I fergive ye, bein' as ye couldn't know that I was built that way. I fergive ye, an' I'll try to hope ye won't none o' ye git the dyspepsy 'long o' eatin' too much."

With another survey of the bright pails and their tempting contents, the pilgrim slowly started forward, to halt again as the section boss called out:

"That's a n'ate bit of a stick in the fist o' ye, but it hardly matches yer suit. What's the matter wid me takin' it for the trouble o' feedin' ye? Give me the stick, an' I'll give ye me dinner."

"Take it—if ye ownly mought!"

The tramp started forward with strangely elate countenance, the polished staff extended in a hand that fairly seemed to tremble with eagerness to get rid of its burden. Only to stop short with a hollow groan and dismal shake of his head.

"Why wouldn't I thin?" growled the boss, rising to his feet with an ugly light in his eyes. "Why wouldn't I take it, an' break the noggin o' ye for the trouble, too?"

"If ye only could! An' I wouldn't charge a cent fer the bitter black cuss that goes with it, nuther!" panted the tramp, visibly shivering as he glanced with half-averted face at the polished staff. "Sure, it'd lift a load bigger'n a mountain off o' the heart o' me to see the last o' the durned ole switch, an'—I say, pardner, your name don't happen to be Bildad Barzilla Bird, does it?"

With a doleful sigh came these words, and though those little gray eyes closely watched the face of the man addressed, there was scant hope of an affirmative response in their depths.

"Is it Pat McCarthy?"

"I knowed they wasn't no sech luck, but I hed to ax it, pardner," mournfully sighed the tramp, wiping the corner of an eye with the brim of his battered felt hat, then slowly leaving the road-bed and nearing the scattered ties on which the section gang were eating their mid-day meal before resuming work. "It's a mighty long story to tell, when a pore, heart-broken

critter is as clean holler to the heels as I be, but ef nothin' shorter 'll sarve ye, why—I've got to do it, mind ye!"

With another lugubrious groan, the tramp sharply struck the spike of his staff into the beaten ground, then gave the metal ring a deft twist which resulted in opening the top section until a flat table in miniature was formed, at the hight of his breast and about one foot square. This was covered by a thickness of dingy black velvet or plush, which had until then been hidden from view inside the neatly-fitting shell forming the top of the staff.

"It's a part o' the price I hev to pay, an' they ain't no gittin' round it, nuther—wu'ss luck!" groaned the sad man as he drew a hand from his pocket, dropping several articles on the cushion thus formed. "Time was when I was wild an' woolly an' full o' fleas—never curried 'bove my knees! Time was—an' now look at me! Wanity, all is wanity! wanity an' waxation an' weariness o' soul an' body! Fer what, an' fer why? Bec'ase I was durned fool enough fer to bet ag'inst another man's game, an' stuck to it trying to come out even! I come out. Yas, I come out, with comb cut an' tail-feathers left abind me!"

The speaker was melancholy personified while dolefully muttering these words, and his gaunt countenance could not have expressed more complete misery and despair had its owner been standing on the scaffold with the black cap ready to shut out the light of day forever.

Yet his hands were nimble enough, deftly manipulating the articles which he had dropped upon his novel table; a little ball of some black substance, and three shells, polished as through long usage, formed of neatly-divided English walnuts. Ranging the shells in a row, he rapidly shifted them over and under each other, using his first and second fingers for this purpose, and handling the black pea with thumb and third finger, now popping it under one, now under another shell, all with a smooth deftness which fairly defied the human eyes to follow with anything like certainty.

In a word, it was the ancient game of "thimble-rigging," as modernized and in vogue at the present day.

"A dollar to a dinner that ye cain't onkiver the little joker fust try, gents," the tramp added, with professional briskness, through which still ran a current of melancholy as though the speaker was thoroughly sick and disgusted with his occupation. "Your eyes may be sharp, but fingers kin fool 'em every time. You'd lose anyhow, but you're dead sure that-a-way, sence I've got to cheat ye whether I want to or no. I'm hungry 'nough fer to chaw on a spike that never see'd hot water, but I beg o' ye not to bet. I'll cheat ye ef ye do—I hev to! An' yit I'm pilin' up a round dollar o' our daddies ag'inst a dinner that the best o' ye cain't pick up the shell that hides the little joker!"

It was a mournful imitation of the glib briskness which the professional uses, and as the sad-eyed tramp paused, his fingers seemed to lose their cunning. For the fraction of a second, every man there distinctly saw the side of the shell furthest from the operator rest on top of the pea, then slip over and remain untouched.

"Bet ye tin dollars I kin pick it out!" sharply cried Pat McCarthy, flashing a look into that mournful face, then watching the marked shell, as he jerked out his wallet to produce the money.

"So ye reckon, pardner, but ye cain't, fer I'm cheatin' ye," sadly replied the tramp, shaking his head as one hand went down into his pocket to reappear with a little buckskin pouch, from which he singled a silver dollar, inadvertently revealing the bright gleam of coined gold. "I'm hungry. I want a solid bite o' grub. I'd buy it right out, but I'm sworn never to do nothin' 'thout fust tryin' the shells. Dollar says you're foolin' yourself! Don't I know? Hain't I bin thar? Ain't I givin' ye plain notice that I'm foolin' o' ye?"

"Taache yer mammy to suck aigs! Dollar goes, an' here's yer—The devil!" spluttered Pat McCarthy, as he picked up the marked shell, only to reveal an empty void where he could have sworn the black pea was snugly nestling all the while.

"Sold ag'in an' got the tin—grub, I meant to say!" with a sad smile wrinkling his lantern jaws as he held up his right hand and revealed the little pea pressed under the long nail on his little finger. "Didn't I warn ye that I was foolin' o' ye all, gents? Didn't I—"

"It's a bloody ch'ate!" growled McCarthy, flushing until his face turned purple with rage and mortification.

The tramp heaved a sigh which was almost a groan, as he uttered:

"Ef I'd only bought wisdom anythin' like as cheap, mebbe I wouldn't be sech a mis'able wreck as you see now, gents. Ef I'd only—"

"Howld yer whisht, ye bloody joskin!" angrily growled the boss, his bulldog face fairly convulsed with rage. "Fer litttle I'd be after breakin' ivery bone in the ugly carcass av ye! Ch'ate a gintlemon—"

"Slug 'im in the neck—I'll take oath the bridge gang did it!"

Even then the man with the shells apparently failed to fully realize his actual peril, though he deftly closed his staff and pocketed the other implements of his peculiar calling as he turned with a sad smile toward the speaker. But as he did so, Pat McCarthy flung the whole weight of his muscular body into a vicious blow, which, had it fairly alighted on the mark, would certainly have knocked the tramp out. As it was, he staggered back from the partly avoided stroke, and with a short cry of indignation swung around his staff, knocking the section-boss endlong before he could lift a hand to guard his skull.

"Fair play is a jewel, an'—"

"Slug him! Down him fer keeps! The bridge gang done it!" came in vicious shouts from the section hands, as, one and all, they closed in on the man with the shells.

CHAPTER II.

LONG JIM, OF THE BRIDGE GANG.

CLANKETY-CLANK! Clankety-clank!

Pounding sharply on the joints of the steel rails echoed the little wheels of the hand-car, its speed maintained by three pair of muscular arms, "pumping" as only strong men thoroughly trained to the work can keep the levers going. Rounding the sharp curve where the road-bed made a considerable detour to avoid a heavy bit of grading, then entering on a level stretch of track where the new rails led for miles as straight as the flight of the crow whose instinct tells it there is a feast waiting its arrival.

One of the trio cast a careless glance ahead, he could hardly himself have told why, since trains were few and far apart on that new road just then. But he made a discovery that drew a sharp ejaculation from his lips as he straightened up, his hands mechanically following the rapid motion of the lever, though they added nothing to its speed.

"I say, Jim! Ain't that a circus ahead?"

Jim Anderson, the boss of the bridge gang, lifted his big brown eyes from the road-bed, which they had been mechanically scanning as the hand-car sped along, and fixed them on a confused crowd occupying the track less than a mile in advance.

The model of a man, as he stood erect. Six feet four inches in his stocking feet, and weighing fully two hundred pounds, without an ounce of useless lumber in his make-up; such was Long Jim, of the bridge gang.

Unless in contrast with other men, this unusual hight would not be fully realized, so perfectly was his frame proportioned in every respect. His shoulders were broad, and remarkably square; his chest full and tapering to a trim yet muscular waist; his limbs long and sinewy rather than massed with muscle. His face was large, in keeping with his general proportions, and if not strictly handsome, was still better: the face of an honest, frank, "manly" man, such as one likes to see at his shoulder when danger impends.

A neatly-trimmed mustache shaded his upper lip. His chin was generous, square, with a deep cleft rather than dimple in its middle—a chin such as a craven-heart never kept company with.

The ghost of a frown stole over his face as he gazed, and his usually soft, mellow tones were hardened as he muttered:

"It's McCarthy's gang. They're fighting among themselves, or— Pump her, boys!" with sudden sharpness, as he more clearly separated the figures forming the crowd ahead. "They've jumped a stranger, sure!"

He flung his weight on the lever, and the car seemed to fairly jump ahead under the enormous pressure. His efforts were seconded by the two men with him, though rather reluctantly at first, and their eyes showed uneasiness as they interchanged quick looks.

Well they might, too! There was little love lost between the two gangs of men—that bossed by Pat McCarthy and the company under lead of Long Jim Anderson, who had charge of the bridges, large and small, on that section of the new road.

Although there had never been a pitched battle between the two gangs, all felt that this must come in time. They never met without hard compliments being exchanged, and more than one single combat had taken place, with varying results.

But, Long Jim never gave this a thought now, though he had but two good men at his back, while McCarthy evidently had his entire force at work. He saw that a full dozen of roughs were besetting a single man, and that was enough to set his big heart on fire.

"It's more than a family row, boys!" he added, his tones as cool and even as though at perfect rest and ease, instead of doing work hard enough to break the heart of any ordinary man, and rushing at headlong speed into what might easily prove his death. "We've got to pull the poor devil out o' that!"

"It's mighty long odds, but you're boss!"

"And we've never jumped an order yet!"

With white faces, fixed jaws, the two fine fellows bent to their work, sending the car along over the joints so rapidly that the thumps were mingled in one unbroken jar.

"Keep up this lick until I give down-brakes, boys," grimly added Long Jim, just the ghost of a smile flitting across his honest face. "If it wasn't for the stranger I'd split the gang like an Express! If they can't flag a train, who's to blame for what happens?"

A mile is soon covered when such arms are on the levers, and yet they were not a single moment too soon in their coming. The evil gang, wrought up to fury by the fall of their boss, were pressing the man with the shells closely, though, as yet, thanks to his stout staff and muscular arms he had kept a little space cleared around him. But now a wiry little rascal was stealing in behind the tramp with bared knife and would almost certainly have added murder to his list of evil deeds had not Long Jim observed him and cried out sharply:

"Wait a bit and give us a bite, won't you?"

Even as he uttered the words, his foot was feeling for the brake, his weight poising in readiness to check the swift revolving wheels. Down came his foot, and checked almost within its own length, the car came to a pause just at the edge of the startled gang, whose mad passions had prevented their making the discovery any earlier than that stern hail.

Seemingly swept from the car by the swift motion which it had so suddenly lost, Long Jim alighted in advance, one sweep of his mighty arm knocking the rascal with the knife a score feet from the road-bed, where he lay in a quivering heap, effectually put out of the row for the time being.

He caught the man with the shells below his arms, swinging him around and dropping him in a heap on the hand-car with as much seeming ease as though he weighed no more than a bundle of rags, then faced the angry and astonished gang, his big brown eyes glowing with a dangerous light as they swept over the rascals to rest on the bloody face of Pat McCarthy, who was just staggering to his feet with a pick in his hands.

"What the devil d'ye m'ane, annyhow?" he spluttered, his brogue growing with his passions as he recognized his hated enemy. Who gave ye l'ave or license to mix in the loikes av this? Who set you up to be knockin' my min down the way av that, ye two-sthory blaggard?"

"Who commissioned you as footpad, Pat?" coldly retorted Long Jim, his tones smooth and even, almost tender to the ordinary ear, but to those who knew the man best they would have conveyed a warning not to be disregarded. "Can't you find better timber for ties than this poor fellow?"

As he spoke, Anderson glanced toward the car, making a slight motion of his hand as though simply pointing his words, but which his two men readily understood and promptly acted upon.

Slowly, as though its speed had not been entirely checked by that sudden pressure on the brake, the hand-car began to move along, inch by inch, hardly to be noticed in that moment of excitement, but gaining an important advantage in that the inertia of the weighty mass was fairly overcome, and ready for a flying start in case of need.

This was all the easier from the fact that the section hands had hurriedly vacated the road-bed, on which, for the most part, that brief scramble had taken place, and were now wholly occupied in watching the two leaders, ready to act on the orders of their chief, but hardly giving the car or its occupants a second thought.

"The dirty scut! Av I git the two hands av me on him wanst! It's tarrud wid the same sthick ye air, Long Jim! An' him a thrampin' 'poshter, chaatin' me min av their harrud airat wages—the thaafe!"

"And to get even you were going to rob him of his life, Pat?" softly smiled Long Jim, his red lips parting enough to afford a glimpse of his white teeth. Do you know what honest men call such revenge, my dear fellow? And do you know how murder is repaid in this section?"

"I know that you're turnin' up the sod for a grave the len'th av yer own bigness, Long Jim," viciously retorted McCarthy, his hairy hand closing tightly on the pick handle and moving it into a more favorable position for suddenly hurling it at his enemy. "Divil take the impudence av ye, annyhow!" with sudden fury his face purpling afresh. "Is it the loikes av ye that's to be bossin' the loikes av me an' my min? An' thim so late robbed av their good money be that dirty scut forniust me? Is it a bloody chaate loike him, that ye stan' up for?"

All this passed rapidly, and the man with the shells, though it was easy to be seen that he had suffered no serious injury at the hands of the gang, apparently required every second in which to regain his wind and scattered senses by no means soothed by the sudden dumping of himself onto the car. But now, with a touch of melancholy indignation in his lugubrious countenance, and showing in his voice he spluttered:

"Hold on, gents! You're shoeing the wrong hoof, or it's me that's doin' the lyin'! Never a red cent did I cheat 'em out of, though that gent wanted to bet on my game, red-hot! 'Tain't that—'tain't tha'r good money that was in danger—but mine!"

"Howld yer whisht, ye dirty scut!" growled McCarthy.

But the man with the shells was not so easily silenced. His gaunt face took on a glow of honest indignation as he felt himself insulted by that vile epithet. He could endure much, but being called a thief was clearly past the boundary of meek sufferance.

In his excitement he rolled off the hand-car, staff in hand, eager to explain the excuse for assaulting him, seemingly unconscious how surely he was endangering not only himself but those who had so gallantly come to his rescue in the face of such long odds. And, gaining the side of Long Jim Anderson, he wildly gesticulated with his iron-shod staff as he added:

"Never a red cent, as I'm a sorrowful sinner, boss! But I was 'tarnal fool 'nough to show the yaller in my weasel-skin, an' that pesky critter tried fer to knock me clean through this section—so he *did*, now! I jest wanted to play a dollar ag'in' a dinner, boss, an' I 'lowed fer to lose ef I won, fer—"

Pat McCarthy ground a savage curse between his teeth, then swung his prepared arm forward with deadly intent, the flashing pick leaving his hand and whirling as it came direct for the two men.

It was a trick which he and his like are very proud of, and one against which few men can guard. To fail to guard is either death or broken limbs when the cast is made in bitter earnest, as now.

Long Jim knew that McCarthy held little love for him or his men, and he also knew that the Irishman cared little for results when his hot temper was fully aroused; but he was not prepared for such an open and deadly assault, and only for the sad-faced tramp, the bridge boss would have fared badly, since the gleaming pick was whirling straight for his broad chest.

Just how the feat was accomplished, none present could have explained with anything like precision, unless it was the man with the shells himself. But, that iron-shod staff swept forward and turned the dangerous missile aside, to bury itself in the earth beyond the track.

Anderson was a bit whiter in the face, but his tones were as quiet and even as ever as he gazed into the face of the shrinking man who had so narrowly escaped being a murderer.

"I wouldn't try that over if I were you, Pat. It's a trick that can kill at both ends, remember."

"I'll down ye yit, d'ye moind, now!" snarled McCarthy, recovering, as the tall bridge boss showed no weapon, and setting this down to fear of himself and men.

"I'll be there when you try it on, Pat," with a short nod. "And, as for this other—better wait and settle that, in town. Don't forget there has already been no little talk about strange and unaccountable disappearances along your section, of—"

"D'ye m'ane to hint—*what* d'ye m'ane, annyhow?"

"That you can't afford to have another man vanish on your section, for a day or two, at least, Pat. As for the rest, we're only three to your twelve, but—"

"Say three an' a hafe, boss!" amended the tramp, with a sickly smile. "I *used* to be a good hafe-dozen, but sorrer hes broke me all up!"

"Shut up! On the car and pump for life! It's for life, mind!" muttered Long Jim, catching a furtive signal from the section-boss to his men.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAWYER MARSHALS HIS WITNESSES.

"SHUT your eyes and dare it, dear boy. If it kills you, I'll engage to write your epitaph: 'Here lies Leslie Kelso, cut down in the flower of his youth by a glass of Pap Fouser's distilled light—'"

"Carve underneath: 'Composed by an honest lawyer, Selby Haslam,' and there'll be a couple of 'em!"

Though coming in a low, half-languid drawl, there was more of insult than of merry jest in this, but its subject laughed lightly, rubbing his plump hands briskly, actually seeming flattered at being thus indirectly called a liar by his employer.

The younger man daintily sipped the liquor, plainly suspicious as to its quality, but he must have been agreeably surprised, for a moment later he quaffed the amber poison, then refilled his glass from the bottle standing on the little round table between the twain.

Selby Haslam leaned back in his seat, an oily laugh bubbling up through his sensual lips as Leslie Kelso curtly added:

"I've tasted worse, in my time."

"And I, many a time. I've made more than one important discovery since first striking Quivering Asp, but I count this not the least: an honest saloonkeeper, and his name is Pap Fouser," with a swift glance across the room toward the tall man behind the bar. "I never thought to rest eyes upon such an anomaly. Think of it, dear boy! Not one in two-score of

his customers could tell the difference between liquid lightning and distilled dew, save as one was rougher-shod than the other. And yet—Pap Fouser voluntarily supplies his guests with as pure liquor as one can expect to find in the toniest club-house!"

"All of which—did you fetch me here to listen to such rot?"

There was a touch of anger in the curt demand, and a vivid flash in the deep-set black eyes, planted much too close together for beauty or an excess of honesty. Haslam flushed a bare trifle, more at the manner than the words; his cheeks would have betrayed him only for his broad white hand making a pretense of wiping his mustaches and his light blue eyes were discreetly veiled by their lids for a moment.

It took no longer than this for him to perfect his habitual mask, and there was a subdued apology in his tones as he murmured:

"I was wrong, perhaps, but I thought we might as well chat as sit in silence. It looks more natural, and makes the minutes pass more rapidly. Still, if you wish—"

This meekness, verging on humility, disarmed the impatient client, and he muttered something about having lost so much sleep of late that his nerves were all ajar.

"For which I am partly to blame, I fear," softly, sympathetically sighed the lawyer, his eyes seeming to grow moist at the very thought. "Perhaps I was wrong in wiring you so urgently, but—"

"What have you discovered?" quickly demanded the younger man, leaning across the table in his eagerness for an answer. "What is it: good or bad? Have you found the girl? What have you done? What have you discovered?"

"That we are on the right track, dear lad," with a soft laugh and a veiled sparkle in his eyes. "That if you continue as you began, if you trust all to my guidance, if you are content to follow whither I lead, we'll get there with both feet in grand shape!"

This bit of choice slang came with a modest blush and a half-abashed laugh. Not often Selby Haslam indulged himself thus, but it appeared to do him good on this occasion.

"Rome was not built in a day, nor can a case so thoroughly tangled up as this be smoothed out of snarl all in a twinkling, much as one might wish it. I've done some fair to choice work while waiting for you, and if you'll kindly permit me to follow my own taste, be sure you'll not regret the courtesy, Kelso."

With a sulky frown and an ugly curl of his thin lips, Kelso rightly interpreted that purring politeness. Softly as he spoke, blandly as he smiled, Selby Haslam could be hard as iron, stubborn as a mule.

The two men were curiously matched, after a "cross team" fashion. Neither had aught in common with the other save the same complement of limbs and features, unless it was their native rascality, for neither one ran any risk of being hung for his honesty, to put it mildly.

Haslam was of middle height, stoutly built, looking the prosperous business man from crown to sole. If anything, the smile upon his broad face was a little too fixed, and as one came to know him better, his bland suavity was apt to be regarded more as a mask than genuine. His cheeks were growing flabby with increase of years, and at times there was apt to be a suspicious glow about the end of his large, bulbous-shaped nose, telling of generous living and heavy drinking, though the man never lived who could honestly say he had ever seen him the worse for liquor.

Kelso was but little above the average height, and rather slenderly built, though there was nothing of the weakling about him, physically. To the contrary, he was on record at more than one fashionable athletic club as being in the front rank of his class as an all-round athlete, with one or two specialties in which no member of anything near his own weight could approach him.

His face was so long that it looked thin and bony, yet not without a certain degree of good looks, though his best friends never accused Leslie Kelso of being a masculine beauty. His hair was jetty black, cropped close to his skull, save where "a bang" fell toward his small, keen hard eyes. He wore no beard of any sort.

His garb was of rich material, fashionably cut and fitting faultlessly. His silk hat was of the latest pattern, his kid gloves of the hue deemed proper by his ilk, his whole style far more appropriate for Broadway than the half-barbarous streets of Quivering Asp.

Selby Haslam smiled again, and softly rapped to attract the attention of the man behind the bar, blandly begging the favor of a fresh bottle. It was brought and paid for, the lawyer looking almost abashed as he gently slipped a yellow coin into the extended hand.

"I dislike to trouble you, Mr. Fouser, but it's so comfortable—"

"I'm here to wait on my customers, sir," was the cold response, in deep, grave tones, that gave Leslie Kelso quite a start, and he turned in his seat to gaze after the man.

"Look him over, and make up your mind about him, dear boy," murmured the lawyer.

"It's not every day you'll meet his like. And—it may come in good play when we get ready to sweep the board!"

"You don't mean—he hasn't anything to do with—with it?"

"Maybe no, maybe yes. All the same, it won't hurt you to study the gentleman a bit. I mean it, dear boy," his smile broadening as Kelso arched his brows at that title. "He is a gentleman, even if he does keep a saloon and sometimes tend his own bar. If you doubt it, take the trouble to look him over, and his place as well."

Kelso obeyed, almost mechanically.

The apartment was large, but differed in few respects from the ordinary bar-room of a western saloon. The floor was sprinkled with fresh sawdust. About the apartment were scattered a number of little round tables, each one intended to accommodate four persons when seated. A stained counter, brightly polished. A shelf behind it, well-stocked with glassware and decanters, with a large mirror, draped with pink mosquito-netting. In broad relief against this covering rested a motto, bearing the almost startling request, in large black letters:

"PLEASE DO NOT SWEAR."

"Never a bit, dear boy," quickly uttered Haslam, correctly interpreting that curl of the lip as his client noted this legend. "Never a trace of hypocrisy in it, as you'd see for yourself in case one of the wild and woolly denizens should come prancing in here with a full head of steam on—to use the vulgate. Pap Fouser would—all eyes open, Kelso!" the words coming in a sharp whisper as a human figure darkened the entrance for an instant. "I knew it! I knew he'd have to come for his appetizer before hunting Mother's Kitchen for supper. I brought you here to take note of him—Sam Hill, gambler and sport!"

The new-comer just glanced toward the remote table at which the lawyer and his client were seated, but without any sign of recognition before crossing over to the bar, where the proprietor was leisurely rinsing glasses in a little brass-hooped tub, while his son, Burt, a hunchback, on a high stool leaned sleepily against the big cooler at the further end of the bar.

"A little of the same, Pap!" cried the gambler, as Haslam branded him, leaning heavily against the bar, noisily slapping a coin on the counter as he spoke. "Never mind about blowing the fire out of it, neither. I want to feel it bite—sharp and deep, and hot as hades or hotter!"

"I'm not hard of hearing, Mr. Hill," was the cold response as Pap Fouser pushed a decanter and glass toward his customer. "You know my rules. Order first, last, all the time. Please don't you try to break it. I say it kindly, remember, but I do say it."

"Then sing it, before I forget, Pap," with a low laugh, pouring the glass even full and spilling a share of it as he half-turned toward the rear of the room, glancing in the direction where Haslam and Kelso were seated over their bottle.

"Look at him, lad!" murmured the lawyer, without visibly moving his lips, though he smiled blandly as he nodded toward the gambler. "Take notes, and we'll compare them with mine when alone."

What Leslie Kelso saw may be briefly summed up. A tall figure, slightly bowed at the shoulders. A red face, naturally florid but now deepened in hue by strong drink. A heavy red mustache, sweeping over the mouth and almost concealing the square chin. Large blue eyes, now streaked with tiny red veins. A close-cropped head of hair, red as his mustache. Neatly fitting garments, but "loud" in pattern, and over-laden with massive jewelry.

The gambler slowly drank his dram, his eyes fixed with cold steadiness on the smiling countenance of the lawyer. When emptied, he set the glass sharply on the bar, and without taking up his change, leaned back with thumbs under his armpits, staring at Haslam until those foxy eyes drooped, the smile faded away, the flabby cheeks slowly flushing beneath that insolent gaze.

This was not the first time those two men had met, but never before had Selby Haslam seen a look like that in those eyes. And, somehow, he felt a growing uneasiness which he vainly strove to dispel.

"An awkward brute, I should judge," coolly muttered Kelso, eying the gambler critically through his half-closed lids. "Poor specimen of a card sharp, if he makes a practice of hitting the bottle so hard!"

"Hello, Oily Gammon!" cried Sam Hill, leaving the bar with a lurch and striding toward the table where the two men were seated. "Up to your old tricks still? Got another sucker on a string, eh?"

"I don't understand—I fail to follow your meaning, sir!" stammered the lawyer, turning pale, his voice husky and uncertain; but the tall gambler paid him no further attention, addressing Kelso instead:

"All eyes open, boy, if you've got anything worth stealing! Oily Gammon'll have his hand to the elbow in your pocket if—"

"Hands off, you drunken brute, or I'll lay you out cold as a wedge!" sharply cried Kelso, brushing the hand from his shoulder.

CHAPTER IV.

PAP FOUSER'S PRESCRIPTION.

At the words the young man swung his chair around until his feet were clear of the table, but making no other move toward arising or drawing weapon. His close-set eyes were blazing hotly, his thin lips became a mere line in his long face, his gloved hands closing tightly as they rested on his legs, ready for instant use in either attack or defense, as the situation should warrant.

Foppishly as he was dressed, slender though his build and small his hands, a cool-headed judge of human nature would have set him down without hesitation as a dangerous antagonist; but the tall gambler was far from being his usual icy-nerved self, just then.

A steady "streak of bad luck" had driven him temporarily off his balance, and he had started off on what he seldom indulged in: "a regular jamboree!"

If Kelso had been different; if he had more nearly resembled the typical "bad men" who are wont to "fight at the drop of a hat," no doubt the gambler would have acted differently. As it was, though he made a half-gesture toward his ever-ready pistol, his hand came back empty, and a touch of contempt entered his voice as he added:

"It isn't a wax figure, then, after all!"

"It's a figure that will wax you to an end if you don't keep your paws nearer where they belong, mister man," coolly retorted Kelso, his thin lips curling in a brief, tigerish smile that meant mischief.

"I beg of you, gentlemen!" hurriedly implored the lawyer, yet visibly shrinking away, like one who has a poor stomach for hard words and harder blows. "It's all a mistake, and—"

"Cheese it, cully!" growled Hill, flashing an insolent glance into the lawyer's face. "Don't chip if you ain't ready to pay all losses. I know you clean through and back again, Oily Gammon. I know that you'd fleece your own father if he gave you even the ghost of a chance. And so I say, little boy," turning with drunken patronage toward Kelso, his long fingers waving airily, then quivering a forefinger before that thin, dark face. "And so I say, button up your pockets or holler police before he skins you clean. So I say—"

There came an interruption just then, which checked Leslie Kelso as he was on the point of rising to end all further annoyance by the blow for which he was noted in club annals.

Pap Fouser had not spoken a word, or made any open effort to prevent the row which he must have seen was brewing. Cold, unmoved, his dark face as sphinx-like as ever, he turned to the shelf and took out a glass, pouring it half-full of ruddy liquor, placing it on a japanned tray, then left his retreat and silently crossed the room, tapping Sam Hill on the shoulder to attract his attention before speaking.

Leslie Kelso, his dark eyes glowing, his right arm stiffened, his feet braced for a leap, paused to note the result. The tall gambler, still further thrown off his guard by this unexpected touch, turned his head with a muttered oath, to instinctively move a hand toward his pistol as he met that steady yet burning gaze.

"Take a drink at my expense, Mr. Hill, please," quietly uttered Pap Fouser, seemingly without seeing that significant gesture, never removing his dark eyes from those bloodshot orbs.

The gambler flushed hotly, then turned pale as death for an instant. This was not the first time he had heard how Pap Fouser quelled a brewing row in "The Shades," though he had never thought to have become an actor in the never varying little drama.

"Please oblige me by taking a drink, Mr. Hill," repeated Pap Fouser, in precisely the same tone of voice, though slightly varying the form of his request.

"I'm not dry—curse your drink and you on top of it, man!" irritably cried the gambler, yet falling back a pace from that burning gaze.

Without removing his magnetic gaze, Pap Fouser deftly placed a cocked and loaded revolver on the tray beside the glass of liquor, then spoke again, still in that cold, mechanical voice:

"You know the rules by which this establishment is governed, Mr. Hill. Take a drink or fight. Come; time passes, and I'm waiting your pleasure, Mr. Hill."

If there had been but the slightest spark of fire in his voice; if he had betrayed even an atom of anger; the choice would have been simple enough, and made on the instant, for whatever his faults, the tall gambler was no physical coward, as the term is usually construed. But those eyes were so cold, even while burning! That voice was so even and measured, so absolutely devoid of all emotion!

It was not like fighting a man. It was like closing in combat with a machine!

"I seldom repeat my words, Mr. Hill, but you are drunk, and I really don't want to hurt you. But you know the rules. Live up to them, if

you please. If not the glass, then the gun. Take your choice."

Haslam saw his chance, and feeling secure from personal injury, promptly accepted it, rising from his seat with grave earnestness in voice and manner as he intreated to save the self-pride of the half drunken gambler:

"I beg of you, dear sir, not to press this unfortunate matter further. I beg of you, most humbly, Mr. Fouser! I'll go bail for this gentleman. After all," with his famous smile irradiating his broad face as he playfully tapped Hill on the arm, "it was nothing more than a little joke between the best of friends, eh, Samuel?"

The gambler smiled half-sheepishly, but plainly glad to get out of an awkward box so easily.

Pap Fouser bowed gravely, his face as expressionless as ever.

"Since you were the assaulted person, Mr. Haslam, I'll grant your request, though this is the first time I ever stopped half-way after offering my patent prescription. I'll reserve the dose until our mutual friend breaks out in a fresh place."

With a stiff bow which included the trio, the eccentric saloon-keeper turned away and resumed his former occupation as calmly as though nothing unusual had happened to interrupt him.

"I'm not sure whether I want to thank you or not, Haslam," sulkily muttered the gambler, still nervously fingering his weapon. "It was a bitter pill, either way, and if the story gets out among the boys, I reckon it'll prove I swallowed the nastiest dose!"

"If you don't tell it, none other will, dear fellow," responded the lawyer, in his smoothest tones, with his blandest smile. "I will not, for I've got a big job in prospective for you. My friend will not, for he is a gentleman, born and bred. Which reminds me: Mr. Hill, Mr. Kelso. This has been a rather unpleasant introduction, but after clouds, sunshine! And I'll go bail you'll prove the best of friends in the end!"

A significant wink warned his client not to reject the gingerly-proffered hand, and the two men formally mumbled an acknowledgment of the introduction, then, with a muttered excuse, Hill left the saloon.

"I promised to show you something interesting, and I reckon I've kept my word, dear boy," softly laughed the lawyer, rubbing his palms together briskly. "What do you think of it? How do you like it as far as you've got, anyway?"

"Is it business, or simply tomfoolery?" frowned Kelso, yet stealing a glance toward that darkly-inscrutable face behind the bar.

"Business from first to last, dear boy," briskly nodded the lawyer as he tipped the bottle over his glass once more. "I'm doing your work as best I know how, and all I've steered you up against is fated to play a part in the little drama of—shall I say it?" bending forward and softly whispering: "The Lost Heiress!"

"Where is she? What is she? What have you learned about her? You are dead sure you're not really steering me—up against a neat little scheme of your own hatching?"

Haslam laughed easily, smiling as though he felt this blunt suspicion only another compliment to his own shrewdness; but as Leslie Kelso frowned more blackly, he hastily muttered:

"Cross my heart, as we used to say when innocent children, dear boy! I believe, despite my wishes, that I've really found the long-lost child—found her alive and well and sweet as a fresh-blown pink, too, worse luck!"

"Where is she, then? Not here, surely?"

"Not precisely here, if you allude to The Shades, dear boy. If you mean does she form one of the population of Quivering Asp, most assuredly," was the brisk reply, as Haslam lifted the glass between himself and the evening light which came through the open door and frosted windows composing the entire front of the saloon.

Leslie Kelso scowled until his black brows fairly met in a sable arch above his deep-set eyes, an ugly line drawing around his compressed lips. Clearly he viewed the matter in a far less cheerful light than the lawyer whom he had chosen to pilot him through an ugly channel. It was a hard, merciless face, just then, and Selby Haslam lost his stereotyped smile for a brief space as his eyes fell upon it while sipping the contents of his glass. But he quickly rallied, for, at heart, he was fully as bad as his client when at his worst.

"So sweet, so fresh, so everything that is charming in a young and blooming maiden that, dear lad, if I wasn't so case-hardened, so far along toward the sere and yellow, I actually fear I would have given a sigh of regret for acting so precipitately—for having taken a retaining fee from your side of the case! I fear I would—yes, I do, dear boy!"

"Don't let your susceptible heart lead you too far into temptation, dear boy!" sneered Kelso, but with an ugly glitter in his dark eyes that pointed his warning. "Danger lies that way, you want to remember. You've had worse friends than I, but never a worse enemy than I would prove if pressed to the point!"

"Heaven forbid!" fervently breathed the lawyer, grasping the gloved hand between both of his, pressing it warmly, tears actually starting

into her eyes as he added: "I'll never betray you, dear boy! I'll never sell you out so long as your bank account remains healthy!"

He chuckled softly at his own jest, which his client knew contained far more truth than poetry. The thought served to clear his brows, for he knew that with gold he could buy this man, soul and body.

"Once more, where is this girl?"

"Call it lady, dear boy, for you'll prefer that term when you have clapped two eyes on my discovery, dead sure! Lady, despite her humble surroundings. Lady—and I'll maintain that with my last gasp!"

"Lady, if you like the title better. Where is she? What are her surroundings? What is she called? Not—that name?"

Kelso paused a little before completing his sentence, but Haslam only smiled without comment. He needed not to ask what that pause meant, for he was thoroughly in the confidence of his client.

"She's at Mother's Kitchen, dear boy, and just at present stationed behind a little desk, with a little railing surrounding her and acting as a barrier to the vulgar herd—one of whom no doubt Sam Hill is which, by this time. I knew he would drop in here for his evening appetizer, for he's a slave to custom. I wanted you to see him and—"

"The foul fiend fly away with Sam Hill!" grated Kelso, chafing hotly against this tantalizing delay. "Where and what is this Mother's Kitchen, as you call it? How can I find it? Curse you, man—"

"Shall I put that down in the bill, dear boy?" with a sly grin as he emptied the bottle and hastily swallowed the liquor before rising in submission to the impatience of his client.

He slipped his hand through the arm of the young man, nodded briskly toward Pap Fouser and his deformed son as he passed toward the door, glibly talking about nothing in particular until they were fairly clear of the building, and he saw that no one was nigh enough to overhear his further speech. Then he spoke out plainly enough:

"Mother's Kitchen is a restaurant, and the only decent one in town, from a culinary point of view. It is run by Josh and Sally Cramer; principally Sally, though!" with a dry chuckle. "Tina Cramer acts as bookkeeper and cashier, drawing custom by her big bright eyes and charming face. Think of it, dear boy! And she the heiress to a million!"

Leslie Kelso growled surlily in response, and Haslam held his peace until almost at their destination, when a woman's voice shrieked aloud.

"That's her!" excitedly cried Haslam. "Some brute is insulting her!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BEAUTY OF MOTHER'S KITCHEN.

SAM HILL drew a breath of relief as he crossed the threshold of The Shades, for he was not too drunk to realize that he had narrowly escaped a collision which would surely have ended in death to either himself or Pap Fouser.

"There was bloody murder in the two eyes o' him—ice on fire!" he muttered through that hairy red mask, pausing to steady himself a bit as the cool evening air struck him and seemed to concentrate all the liquor he had swallowed in his buzzing brain. "Didn't I know the luck was crooked? But curse me if I ever thought it would steer me up against any such dead open-and-shut game as this! If it ever gets out! If the boys ever catch onto it!"

There was something in the thought that served to partially counteract the liquid fire which he had been pouring down his throat nearly all day, and Sam Hill drew his tall figure erect with a dark frown of defiance as his red-veined eyes flashed hotly about him. Fortunately there were few pedestrians near, and more lucky still, not one of those few happened to be looking in his direction, or with a smile sufficiently clear to offer an excuse for an outburst on his part.

"I'd have to jump the town too quick!" he added, gratingly, through his clicking teeth, as he slowly resumed his course. "Either that, or start a river of red! And she'd hear of it, sure! Either way I'd lose all chance of raking in the dainty little rosebud—if I ever had any! This cursed black streak is enough to make a man doubt even his own existence!"

Like the vast majority of his guild, the tall gambler was superstitious to the very core, and a most devout believer in luck, good and bad. He had met with his share of both sorts in his life, but of late days Dame Fortune seemed to have taken an especial spite against him, and everything went wrong as wrong could be.

The "unlucky streak" caught him "well heeled," and for a time Sam Hill bore his losses with true gambler's philosophy, content to await the turn of the tide, which would once more bring all things his way. But that turn was strangely slow in coming. The night last past he had felt sure it was upon him, and with unshaken nerve he had pressed his chance to the

utmost, meaning to recoup himself at one sitting; only to leave his seat at the faro-table in the room adjoining the saloon of Pap Fouser, without a dollar which he could call his own.

No person could have told as much from his face, for Sam Hill was sober then; he never even tasted liquor while engaged in business; but the dealer shrugged his shoulders and exchanged a sly wink with his looker-out as the gambler pushed back his chair.

"'Nother weasel-skin squeeze out flat!" that wink conveyed, for Sam Hill was too wholly a gambler to be frightened away from the green table by a run of hard luck so long as he owned enough to make a bet.

The gambler went to bed, but not to sleep. He lay pondering his disagreeable condition, and with the first rays of the rising sun, he reached the inevitable conclusion: "hoodooed!"

Like all of his class, Sam Hill had his own particular recipe for breaking such an evil spell, and without further thought of taking the rest he really needed more than anything else, he rose, dressed, left his lodging-place in search of some one who might supply him with the funds his recipe strictly demanded.

This was not difficult, for Hill was really ranked among the better grade of professional sports, and then he seriously set about getting thoroughly drunk. This was a harder task for him than for the vast majority, for liquor had little power over him, brain or body, and for this reason he took time by the forelock. If he could get fairly full by the hour for resuming play at Pap Fouser's place—

"And I can manage a secret touch on Burt's pack, I'm all right!" he nodded to himself with a grim smile.

It was a belief which he shared with many another follower of fickle fortune, that bad luck might be changed to good if he could covertly touch the deformity of a hunchback, and it was this hope that, much more than the habit alluded to by Selby Haslam, led the gambler to The Shades that evening. And it was the sight of Burt Fouser, lazily resting beyond secret touch that, more than aught else, led the gambler into breaking the rules on which Pap Fouser so strictly insisted.

"I've got to break it some way!" frowned the gambler, still thinking of his "hoodoo" as his feet mechanically trod the way to which they were so well accustomed, slowly but surely carrying their owner to the restaurant at which he was wont to take his meals. "Never another hump to be found in all Quivering Asp. And Pap would be watching me too mighty close for the trick to be turned on his kid! If I wasn't so far gone—if the smell o' the still wasn't so powerful—if I'd only have tried that trick on before hitting the bottle!"

The wild fancy was sufficiently startling to briefly drive the intoxicating fumes from the gambler's brain, and he stopped short with a sharp breath as he found himself almost in front of the restaurant, denoted by the big sign which spanned the walk, boldly lettered with the curious and quaint title mentioned by Selby Haslam: "Mother's Kitchen."

Beyond this peculiar name, there was little to attract the eyes of strangers in the outward appearance of the place; a modest two-story building, with square front, painted a dead white. The door was filled by a double screen of green wire. On either side was a large window, filled with neatly-arranged pots of flowers and vines.

The establishment was almost as old as the town itself, older than the railway which gave the place its temporary importance as the end of the road; and common report had it that Josh Cramer, the ostensible head and front of Mother's Kitchen, had made a pretty penny out of his venture already.

A meek, mild, soft-spoken man was this Josh Cramer, irresistibly reminding one of a short, fat, dimpled, sleepy child dressed in manly garments, and still further disguised with snowy white wig and cunningly counterfeited baldness.

The last man in the world whom one would pick out as "a hustler," or gifted with push and enterprise such as had been shown in connection with Mother's Kitchen. And no mistake would have been made, either, for there was "a power behind the throne," and her name hung over the door of the restaurant.

It was Sally's cooking which delighted the palates of the guests. It was her enterprise had kept Mother's Kitchen alive and prospering, twice making sudden and extensive jumps, to land each time in what soon afterward proved to be the new "end of the road." Few gave Sally credit for all that she deserved, for few even knew that such a personage existed, and still fewer ever caught sight of her outside of her kitchen proper; but Sally cared little for this. Sally knew, and so did Josh and Tina, and that was enough.

Tina! She it was of whom Sam Hill was thinking just then as he stopped short, flushing, his eyes beginning to sparkle with renewed fire as he mentally repeated the vague fancies which had floated across his bemused brain a few seconds before.

"Why not? If I had the whole world to pick

and choose from, I'd bank on Tina, every time!" he inaudibly muttered, tugging at his drooping mustache as he strove to see through the mass of flowers and foliage, knowing just where Tina Cramer must be seated at that hour. "And even if she's been there before, still I'd be the winner, and a mighty sweet kiss ahead!"

It was another of his secret superstitions by which an obstinate "hoodoo" might be broken. If he could beg, steal or ravish a kiss from virgin lips—lips which had never before known the touch of man as friend or lover, outside of her own family circle!

The strong liquor he had swallowed so freely was surely getting the better of his wits, or Sam Hill would never have entertained such an idea, for at bottom he was an honest man, if not a gentleman, and he had never met a woman for whom he entertained a higher degree of respect than Tina Cramer. In more than one moment of confidence he had admitted to himself that he really loved the little maiden, and if he felt himself more worthy such an angel, he would surely beg her to make him forever blessed by becoming his wife.

This when sober. Now he was well along toward drunkenness!

His jaws squared, his brows lowered, he drew a sharp, quick breath and lurched toward the door leading into the restaurant, firmly resolved to beat the hoodoo which some malign fate had imposed upon him.

And yet, he had scarcely crossed the threshold and met the bright, half-smiling glance of Tina Cramer as she sat at her little desk behind the low railing, acting as bookkeeper and cashier as usual, than his mad resolve began to weaken. Drunk as he was, it seemed an impossible task which he had set himself. To insult this little angel!

More human than angelic, though, after all, and so much the better for living in this everyday world.

A little under the average height of her sex, Tina Cramer could not have been more perfectly proportioned, more healthfully beautiful, more entirely lovable than she was.

A perfect *brune*, with jetty hair that clustered in tiny curls over her shapely head, with large, lustrous eyes, with rose-tinted cheeks and a little mouth with lips as red and luscious as perfect health could make them. In a word—Tina Cramer!

Instinctively Sam Hill bowed, and Tina softly uttered:

"You are a little later than usual, Mr. Hill, but your place has been reserved for you," with a smile that sent the fire burning through the veins of the gambler, driving away his hardly-formed resolve to behave himself.

Who could resist? And the warm air was intensifying his drunkenness. And that cursed hoodoo! And those luscious lips!

Almost before he knew it, the tall gambler was leaning against the low railing, thickly muttering:

"Tina, I love you! Tina, I must—"

The rosy cheeks paled a little and the big eyes grew wider with fright at this unexpected address, but before she could even shrink back, the gambler threw an arm about her slender waist and drew her swiftly toward him, stifling her wild shriek for help with his whisky-tainted lips!

Only a madman or a drunkard would have dared go so far, with nearly a score of men sitting in the restaurant, ready to defend or avenge an insulted lady, but Sam Hill was mad, for the moment, and never reckoned the danger he was running.

Tina struggled frantically, and actually loosened that drunken grasp upon her waist before any other in the room fairly realized her peril, but before they could leave their seats a slender figure shot through the door and with a sharp ejaculation sent the gambler reeling away, to fall heavily at full length on the floor. It was a marvelous blow for one of that seemingly slight build to strike, but one for which Leslie Kelso was noted in more circles than one.

"You infernal scoundrel!" he grated, spurning the fallen gambler with his foot, then turning with a faint smile toward Tina Cramer, who was leaning against her desk, a hand pressed over her wildly throbbing heart, pale as death with mingled fright and indignation. "Your pardon, madam, for making a scene, but I really couldn't help it when I saw— May I throw the hulking brute out into the street?"

"I'll have your—I'll cut your heart out!" panted Hill, drawing a knife from his bosom as he unsteadily scrambled to his feet, only to have the stout figure of Selby Haslam step between and deftly disarm his trembling hand.

"Simmer down, man alive!" the lawyer sharply muttered, at the same time forcing the half-stunned drunkard toward the door. "Don't you see the gang? Come out of this, or they'll tear you limb from limb! Come away with me unless you want to commit suicide!"

It was no idle warning. The guests were leaving their seats, excitedly demanding what was wrong, more than one drawing a ready weapon and looking only too willing to make hasty use of them at the least excuse. There was danger, and plenty of it, too!

CHAPTER VI.

A CUNNING OLD FOX.

"Don't let them—he is drunk—he didn't really mean it!" the maiden pantingly exclaimed, turning paler than ever with a true womanly horror of bloodshed. "Stop them, I beg of you, sir!"

Leslie Kelso flushed warmly, and an unusual glow leaped into his black eyes, as he felt those little hands clasping his arm, and those lovely eyes uplifted so eagerly to his face. It was a far different meeting from the one he had anticipated, but it possessed its own charm, after all.

"Don't crowd, gentlemen!" he cried sharply, sternly, motioning back the eager guests. "You hear what the lady says? It was all a mistake; and if you are gentlemen, you will accept her verdict without question."

Meanwhile, Selby Haslam was slowly forcing the gambler toward the threshold, eager to get him outside, believing that he could make a point in the game he was playing by so doing. But Sam Hill was not entirely helpless, and was able to resist long enough to drop a few words.

"I was drunk, Miss Cramer, and I humbly beg your pardon for what I did. And you, my fine covey," flashing a vicious glance toward Leslie Kelso—"I'll see you later, sport!"

The man addressed made no reply, unless his contemptuous smile might be called such, and then the stout lawyer succeeded in gaining the victory, pushing the gambler outside, locking arms with him and hastening down the street as though still fearful of avenging pursuit.

"Step out, man!" he panted, with a fearful glance over his shoulder toward the door of Mother's Kitchen. "I've only one life to lose, and they'd run me up a tree to keep you company if they catch us! Confound it, Samuel, step out—step long—step lively!"

Whether it was the cool night-air that drove the thick blood to his brain, or whether he was just beginning to fully realize the effect of that deftly-delivered blow, Sam Hill made no further resistance to his self-appointed guide. His steps were uncertain, and he seemed to feel the need of a supporting arm for the time being.

Haslam turned the nearest corner and hurried on as rapidly as he could drag his companion, never drawing a free breath until another corner was turned, still without signs of pursuit.

"Thank Heaven for so much, anyway!" he panted, steering the gambler up against a dead-wall and dropping his arm for the moment, removing his hat and mopping his shining, heated brow. "Either the dear boy has stood them off, or they've struck out on a false scent. Why did ye do it, Samuel? Why couldn't you wait until you caught the little darling alone? Foolish, very rash and foolish, my son!"

The tall gambler stared vacantly into that shining face, his eyes mechanically following that dolefully wagging paw until it made him dizzy. One hand shakingly lifted to the painfully growing lump on his right jaw, where he could distinctly feel each sharp knuckle of that kid-gloved hand.

"You're double lucky, Samuel," softly laughed Haslam, noting the action, his foxy eyes twinkling with thinly veiled malice the while. "Lucky to escape a lynching frolic, and lucky to get off without being actually knocked out. I never knew the dear boy to miss his mark before; but miss it he did by just a scant inch!"

"I'll slit his hide to make me shoe-strings!" viciously grated Hill, starting away from the supporting wall, to stagger blindly and lift both hands to his throat as though choking.

Haslam saw this, and pushing him back with one hand, produced a flat pocket-flask with the other, holding it to his lips.

"A hair of the dog, Samuel! Drink hearty, man! And I'll tell you how you can make heap more ducats than going into the shoe-string business. So—steady, dear fellow! Now wait a bit until you can begin to feel your oats—that's hearty!"

The gambler almost emptied the flask before relinquishing it, and the smooth, oily liquor was powerful enough to act almost immediately. Hill drew himself erect, expanding his chest with a long breath, brushed a hand repeatedly across his eyes, then spoke in quite steady tones:

"I'm all right now. What do you ask for all you've done?"

"The favor of your company for a few minutes, dear fellow," softly responded the lawyer, slipping a hand through the arm of the gambler and moving away at a more leisurely pace. "Just long enough to explain why my hot-tempered young client was so ready to chip in without waiting for an invitation. Just long enough to make perfectly clear my meaning of a bit ago; to show you how you can serve your pocket better than by playing butcher on Leslie Kelso."

"I owe him one," was the slow, cold response. "I never yet failed to pay my debts, and I'll never begin with him!"

"There's more ways than one of skinning a cat, Samuel," laughed the lawyer, briskly leading the way to his little office, before which he had

hung out his "shingle" while working up the case intrusted to him by Leslie Kelso. "I'll try and prove this to you, in a few minutes. Only a wee bit further, my dear fellow!"

Sam Hill made no response, but strode along beside the lawyer in dogged silence. He had recovered from that heavy, benumbing shock, so far as his physical powers were concerned, and with it had vanished much of his drunkenness. If he had been nearly as sober then as now, he would never have made such a shameful assault upon Tina Cramer.

Selby Haslam seemed content to do the talking for both, and he rattled along glibly enough as long as they were on the street, without saying much of importance, or shaping words which he would not have been willing all Quivering Asp should have heard, after those few sentences relating to Leslie Kelso and how Sam Hill might wipe out his avowed debt by other means than open violence.

In a few minutes the little office was reached, the door opened and closed behind them, the key silently turning in its wards before Haslam struck a match to light the oil lamp suspended from the low ceiling near his little desk. This done, he produced glasses and a bottle from a drawer below his desk, smiling brightly as he placed them on the table and drew chairs near the same.

"Be seated, Samuel, and help me tie a night-cap," he laughed, briskly rubbing his hands together as he viewed the preparation with head rakishly cocked over one shoulder. "Drink, drink and be merry, for eatables we have none, to amend the old saying. Eh?"

"Come down to business, if you really have any," gruffly uttered the gambler, dropping into a chair, but ignoring the liquor. "You've earned a patient hearing, for I reckon you saved me from killing, or being killed, back yonder. I'm ready to listen clean through, but don't draw it out too long. I'm feeling crookeder than a wild grapevine, and even you might discover my fur is made of porcupine-quills if you try to stroke me against the grain."

Just the shadow of a frown flitted across the face of the lawyer at this. For reasons sufficient for himself, he would have preferred the gambler in almost any other mood for the moment. He counted much on the alluring bottle, but he was far too shrewd to press that point just at present, though he uncorked the bottle and filled his own glass to stand and diffuse its devilish odor.

"Business goes, Samuel," he softly purred, leaning his arms on the table, one hand shading his face from the bright light falling from the hanging lamp. "And to take the plunge right off the spring-board—you may have wondered why my young friend was so ready to assist that fair young damsel a bit—"

"Don't crowd that point too deep, Haslam," growled Hill, frowning.

"No deeper than I absolutely have to, dear fellow; but I really must beg of you to bear with me for a little. I'll handle it with gloves, if you wish, but touch it I must," persisted the lawyer.

"Go on. You've earned the right, as I said before."

"The simple fact is this: Leslie Kelso and Tina Cramer did not meet for the first time this evening. Wait a bit, Samuel," waving a plump hand as the tall gambler gave a slight start and seemed on the point of interrupting him. "I'm speaking by the card, I solemnly assure you. They are really old acquaintances, and much more than that. So much more that—I'm placing a great trust in you, Samuel—that at one time the day was actually set for their wedding."

Haslam paused, watching the gambler keenly, as though anticipating an outburst of some sort. But none such rewarded his announcement. Hill simply caught up the full glass and emptied it at a gulp, then settled back in his chair, silently waiting to hear more, his bent forefinger pressing the red mustache between his teeth.

"It was a hot and swift courtship, and the ending came even more sharply. There was a quarrel—I'm not saying which was the most to blame, even if I ever knew—but it came about through a ridiculous mistake into which cooler, wiser heads would never have fallen. But let that part go for the present."

"Naturally the young lady's parents espoused her cause, and soon after made one of their unheralded flittings. When Kelso came back to his senses, he could not discover whether his lady-love had fled, and in the end he sought my services. Of course I found them, since we are both here."

"That cracks the shell, Samuel, and now we're about to get at the kernel! I had to earn my fees, of course, but if I had known as much at first as I know now, I hardly think even so generous a retainer would have tempted me to take up the case—on his side, at any rate! Not that I scorn the ducats, Samuel; you would laugh at any such pretense on my part, but because I have been offered double pay if I can prevent Kelso from making this young lady his wife!"

"In one word, Samuel, there is a certain not-

to-be-named lady, rich beyond compute, who is over head and ears in love with young Kelso—lucky dog! if he only deserved the half of it!"

"What is all this to me?" celdly demanded Hill.

"A modest fortune, if you care to take the trouble to rake it in," was the brisk response. "Of course I can't do the job myself, seeing I am under his employ, but what's the matter with you taking hold of it?"

"What is your profit?" sneered the gambler.

"None so big but what you'll get all you ask for, be sure," chuckled the oily rascal, his eyes twinkling brightly. "And as a friend, I warn you not to be too modest in fixing your terms, Samuel. She can afford to pay heavily for her whims, and I don't know any one who could get more sport out of it than you, dear fellow!"

"Spread it thin, will you?" growled the gambler, his lip curling. "Come out flat-footed with what you want me to do, and I'll answer you after the same fashion."

There was no immediate response, for Selby Haslam busied himself with bottle and glass, slowly dropping the liquor, seemingly in no great haste to finish the subject. Possibly he was debating just how far he could with safety commit himself.

"It isn't for me to say just how far you shall go, or just what steps you shall take, Samuel," he finally uttered, closing one eye and gazing critically through the upheid glass. "All I have any right to say or do is just to spread the board before you; what food you prefer must be chosen by your own self."

"If nothing happens to Tina Cramer, this old quarrel will surely be patched up between them, and she married by Kelso. I can't afford to fall out with my client. I could still less afford to have physical harm fall upon him for my pocket's sake if nothing more tender. But—"

"You don't love him, and I can't blame you for so feeling. You want to get even for that blow. All right. Get even, and at the same time put big money in your pocket!"

"If anything should happen to prevent and make this marriage impossible—if the young lady should die, or even elope with a handsomer man, for instance—eh?" softly whispered the lawyer, leaning far across the table and peering eagerly into that florid face.

The gambler started sharply, his face paling visibly, but with an effort he controlled his voice sufficiently to say:

"You think that would hit him hard—harder than death?"

"I don't think, I know it!" with an impetuous nod. "It would break him all up! And—don't forget this: it'll be big money for you, too!"

CHAPTER VII.

PUMPING FOR DEAR LIFE.

BARELY above his breath Long Jim Anderson breathed that warning, feeling sure that the critical moment was nigh at hand. He caught Pat McCarthy making a covert signal to his men, and it hardly required the gift of prophecy to divine that mischief was meant, after that murderous attempt against his life.

"Go easy, Pat, and you'll be better satisfied when the pay-car takes your time," he sharply added, still showing that cool, dauntless front to the enemy, while he strained his hearing intensely.

He dared not remove his gaze from the face of the section-boss just then, and he knew that it would be doubly imprudent to give the car and his men even a passing glance before all was in readiness for the move by which, if at all, their lives were to be saved from that wolfish gang.

His practiced ears barely caught the faint murmur made by the slowly moving wheels, as the cogs met and parted company, and this told him all was going as well as he could expect under the circumstances. There would be less time lost in getting the "pumper" under headway, and each second might be worth a life just then.

"Divil take yer hints, an' pack ye wid 'em, Long Jim!" growled McCarthy, his hand more openly forming the signal which Anderson had intercepted. "I'm sick o' the lip o' ye, annyway, an' the sooner ye pull out o' this the better fri'nds we'll be the next maatin'. Hoo-wow! be aff wid ye out o' the way av dacint min's worruk! Ye won't, will ye?"

Anderson caught at the unexpected opening, and sharply motioned a hand toward his two men on the car, who promptly flung their strength on the levers, making the well-oiled cogs rattle. With almost the same motion he caught up the man with the shells and literally tossed him aboard, the descending lever rapping his head smartly, and flattening him out at the feet of the two bridge hands.

"We'll pull out, Pat, without waiting for your orders, and—"

"Luk at 'im, lads!" sharply cried McCarthy, flinging up his stout arms in poorly feigned indignation. "Luk at thim staalin' away the poor, definseless joskin, to rob an' murder him! Will ye stan' by an' saa the loikes av that, I dunno? Will ye—"

An ugly chorus of curses and cheers drowned his further speech, and Long Jim instinctively ducked his head to avoid a humming spike that narrowly missed its aim. He felt, rather than saw, that the entire gang were gathering to crush him and his at a blow, needing no more than the silly pretext on which Pat McCarthy had seized for lack of a better, and on which he was ringing the changes as he scrambled up the slope to the road-bed:

"Sure, it's robbery an' murder he m'anes, an' thin to fling the blame av it onto the loikes av us! Down him, min! Save the thramp, av ye have to squilch the lave o' thim, an'—"

With a rush the section hands were closing in, catching up such tools as lay nearest to them, all ugly enough to endanger life in such hands: crowbars, picks, shovels, bolts and fish-plates; anything and everything fit for beating down a hated and feared enemy.

A dozen spikes hummed viciously through the air, and one tore a ragged slit across the shoulder of the bridge-boss, stinging him sharply in its passage. His foot slipped as he ducked to avoid a whirling bolt, and it seemed as though he was going down before that first shower of missiles.

The section hands set up an evil yell at this, and, mingling with it came a doleful cheer from the man with the shells as he rolled off the rear of the slowly moving car, staff in hand.

"Sorrowful grandpap! I'm all broke up, but I *cain't*—I knowed it! I jest knowed I'd hurt somebody!"

The man with the shells scrambled to his feet, a chunk of hard clay in his hand, which an instant later struck Pat McCarthy fairly on the buckle of his belt, driving the wind out of him, cutting short his words and staggering him back until one heel caught against an obstruction and he toppled over, gasping for breath, effectually disposed of for the moment at least.

"Now I *hev* done it; an' I jest knowed I would ef I got good an' skeered!" howled the tramp, seemingly fairly wild with mingled grief and terror, yet causing his stout staff to split the air in crazy circles as he rushed upon the nearest ruffians. Crack—clatter—bang! Now on a thick skull, now meeting pick-handle or iron bar, then doubling up another tough with a thrust in his middle!

All this before Long Jim Anderson could fairly recover his footing from that unlucky slip—all this before Collins and Busby could spring to the assistance of their chief. And Pat McCarthy had hardly settled on the broad of his back when his men fell back from before that crazy human whirlwind!

They missed the voice of their boss, and lacking a head, were only too easily demoralized for the moment.

Long Jim saw this and realized the importance of promptly improving the opening. He knew it could not last long. Even though McCarthy should prove effectually disabled, his men would quickly rally, when there could be only one ending. Four men, no matter how good they might be, could not stand long before the rush of a round dozen, all armed with ugly weapons.

"Jump her, lads!" he shouted over his shoulder, then leaped forward and caught the man with the shells about his middle, swinging him clear of the ground and whirling about to toss him upon the slowly moving hand-car for the third time. "Pump for dear life—you've got to!"

He grasped the rear of the car and forced it ahead with all his great strength, causing the cogs to hum and the wheels to grind as the clumsy vehicle shot down the rails. He ran along behind for a few yards, then sprang aboard and grasped the lever, casting a swift look over his shoulder.

To see the startled section hands surging toward them, hurling picks and bars and spikes—anything on which they could first lay hold—to see Pat McCarthy stagger to his feet with one hand gripping his middle and the other furiously gesticulating as he gasped:

"After thim, ye devils! Will ye lit thim go—*ow-wow*!"

Half a dozen men started on a run in chase, and Jim Anderson grimly muttered as he flung his weight on the lever, now beginning to fly up and down with greater rapidity:

"Break a cog or set it on fire, lads! If those scrubs catch up now, we'll have to hurt some of them—*bad*!"

For a few seconds it really seemed as though the men on foot would succeed in overhauling the hand-car, in which case mischief must surely result. They gained on the fugitives, rapidly at first, but more slowly as the car gained impetus. And when they fairly realized that they were doing no more than holding their own, they spread out a little more, thus gaining room in which to swing and hurl their tools at their escaping prey.

Only one came true to its mark, and that was warned off by the ever-ready staff in the hand, of the man with the shells, despite the fact that, an instant before, he had been clinging, in seeming terror, to the edges of the car as though afraid of being hurled off of the unguarded platform.

"Sufferin' Moses! ef I only hed claws all over me! I'm goin'—"

"Stick tight, pardner," laughed Long Jim, feeling that the worst was over. "We're leaving them too fast—"

He stopped short, his teeth clicking sharply as they shot past a couple of hand-cars lying close beside the track, and the thought which they inspired was quickly confirmed by a hoarse shout from McCarthy:

"Kape on, ye joskins! Clap the caars on the iron an' we'll save the raggid divil even yit!"

"I reckoned as much," said Anderson, his brows lowering. "They'll give us a chase, dead sure! I was hoping their cars were on the other side o' the gang."

There was no response, and his two men bent their shoulders over the swiftly moving lever. They knew what such a chase meant. And they knew that Pat McCarthy openly boasted that, man for man, his gang could "bump" any other along the road.

Rapidly as they passed by the cars, each one had noticed the heap of spikes, bolts, nuts and a few fish-plates resting on the flat car used for carrying tools and fittings. If this was taken to join in the chase, such missiles might prove almost as deadly as bullets of lead impelled by plenty of powder!

"Steady does it, boys," coolly uttered Anderson, twisting his neck until he could glance back along the road-bed. "They've made their brags, but they've never measured wind and muscle with us."

Still silence. Man for man the gallant fellows would have borrowed little trouble as to the ultimate result; but three pair of arms can hardly be expected to prove equal to all that can find place on the double levers, and it was a long stretch to where they might expect to find hearty friends in readiness to back them up. Never so long as it seemed just now, when Anderson added:

"They're jumping the cars on the iron, now! Well, they'll have wet rags before they get nigh enough to open fire!"

His grimy face, pale with the instinctive fear of falling which one can't help but experience when first riding on a hand-car at racing speed, the man with the shells watched the movements of the section gang. He uttered a doleful groan as he saw how easily they flung even the heavily-laden flat on the irons, following it with the other, gripping the levers as many as could, while two men, with Pat McCarthy between them, stood on the flat, cheering the sturdy rascals to double energy.

"An' all 'long o' sech a mis'able critter as me!" he gasped, clinging tenaciously to the woodwork even while adding: "Kick me off, boss, an' mebbe it'll wreck them keers runnin' over my karkidge!"

"Stand up and pump if you want to do anything, man!" sharply retorted the bridge-boss. "Kicking you off wouldn't check 'em. They only wanted an excuse for going for us, and now they've got it!"

"Ef I was only rough-shod!" gasped the tramp, whiningly, yet carefully slipping his staff between the wheel-box and the little tool-chest which the car carried. "Ef you'd jest len' me a— Sorrowful grandpap!" with a swift catching of his breath as Long Jim gripped him by the back of his neck and jerked him to his feet, holding him steady until his fingers closed on the hard-wood lever.

Once gripping that, there was no letting loose with safety for a novice; the motion must be kept time with, whether or no, even if nothing else was done. But the tramp had no desire to shirk or soldier, and after the first few dizzy movements, he fell to adding both weight and muscle to the "pump."

"Tain't so awful hard, boss, but it's mighty durn sudden!" he panted, his voice muffled by the limp brim of his hat blowing down over his face. "Ef I wasn't—so pesky—holler—inside—"

"Save your wind, stranger," flashed jolly Will Busby. "You'll need it all before you get any better feed!"

There was no response. Even the novice was beginning to realize that few things come harder than a "spell at the pump." Even this soon his brain was beginning to throb, his breath to cut his throat as it grew hotter and dryer, his loins to feel as if an iron girdle was being drawn tighter and tighter around them!

At brief intervals Long Jim looked over his shoulder, each time measuring the space dividing their car and those filled by their pursuers. And each time his jaws grew squarer than ordinary, for he knew that they were being steadily, if slowly, overhauled.

Yet they could do no more. Their pace was as swift as they could make it, with such a long race before them. If only a short distance—only a mile or two, even! Then a desperate spurt would suffice, with the advantage they already held. As it was—

The cog-wheels roared, the rails buzzed beneath the wheels, an oily stench came up from the heated bearings. Then—

"Sufferin' grandpap! looky yander!" shrieked the tramp, glaring wildly ahead where a puffing train was just rounding the curve. "Hold

on! Stop the train! Whistle fer brakes some body, fer we're boun' to 'tarnal smash ef ye don't!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WIND, MUSCLE AND HEADWORK.

IN his wild excitement he slackened his grip on the lever, and would almost certainly have been flung backward off the car if Long Jim Anderson had not gripped him by an arm and steadied him, sharply crying in his ear:

"Hang on and keep stroke, you idiot! You can't do any better than that if you try, and may do heap sight worse?"

"But—sufferin'—Jemima—to—thunder!" gasped the poor fellow, vainly trying to obey, but having each word fairly jerked out of him by the sorely jarring lever.

"Down, and grab a root, then!" angrily growled Anderson, thrusting the tramp to the floor, and guarding him with one foot until he could steady himself with a firm grip on the edges. "Strike her up, boys!"

Was he insane? Was he blind to the oncoming train? Were his ears unable to read the meaning of those short, sharp whistles coming from the locomotive? Did he count on the cars stopping in time to avoid a collision which could end only in one way; death to them all?

Even his two men, trusting him implicitly though they did, stole swift glances over their shoulders at the rapidly lessening distance. The train was coming down grade, and was a Freight at that, always doubly dangerous for a hand-car to meet unexpectedly, for the space which would suffice to stop a passenger train dead, is hardly sufficient for a Freight to slacken speed at all.

"Keep your heads, boys, and jump when I give the word!" coolly uttered Long Jim, keenly watching the train, and as he saw its engineer and fireman leaning out of the cab windows on opposite sides, he swung his arms in the signal meaning "push on!"

Luckily for the shivering tramp that he was ignorant of this, as he crouched close to the floor of the car, fairly holding his breath as he anticipated the frightful shock. Since he could not see, he could at least hope that the freight was breaking up in time to spare them!

Wild cheers and taunting yells came from the section gang as they saw the fugitive thus caught between the devil and the deep sea, but Jim Anderson only smiled grimly as he flashed a single glance backward to see that they were already slackening their speed.

"Every inch counts, lads!" he said, his voice as clear and even as if no peril threatened them, growing more and more imminent with each passing moment. "Ready, when I jump on the brake!"

When the tramp first espied the front of the train rounding the curve, it was fully half a mile distant, giving plenty of time for the fugitives to check the car and remove it from the irons, but this distance lessened rapidly, since the hand-car was running at almost equal speed to that of the Freight. Closer—perilously close already—yet the gallant fellows never turned their heads, never lessened the pressure they were putting on the lever, trusting blindly to the cool nerve and quick wit of their chief.

Anderson lifted his right foot and rested its ball on the ribbon top of the flat lever beside the wheel-box, his brown eyes glowing with a red-dish light such as few men had ever seen in them before, his face hard-set and expressionless, his breath even and steady as though all peril was conquered.

Excitedly the trainmen motioned, leaning far out the cab windows. Angrily the whistle screamed in short, sharp puffs as the train rumbled nearer and nearer until—

"Hold fast and jump her off!" thundered Anderson as he brought all his weight down on the brake, checking the car so suddenly that the men almost lost their grip on the lever, and only the wheel-box kept the tramp from being hurled far ahead to be ground beneath the mighty engine!

Inside thrice its own length the hand-car was stopped short. The two men caught one end while Jim Anderson jerked up the other, lifting its weight, with that of the tramp added, with hardly a visible effort, clearing the road-bed with not over two yards to spare!

"Fools!" came floating down to them from the blanched lips of the frightened engineer as he tore past them, and they could imagine his hot curses as he leaned far out the window, shaking a clinched fist in their direction.

"Sufferin' grandpap!" gasped the man with the shells, rolling off the car, shivering like a withered leaf. "Is that the way you—"

"Stand by and lend a hand, will you?" sharply interposed Anderson as the train rumbled swiftly along. "Pat knows our little trick now, and he'll do his level best to even up in the end. Ready to jump her on the irons, every one! The fun has only begun, I'm thinking!"

"Ef you call *this* fun, I want to know—"

"Buckle to it, now!" grated Anderson, as the bright red caboose drew near and then rumbled past. "Every second now, counts mighty big!"

Even the man with the shells lent his powers to replacing the car as rapidly as possible on the rails, and seeing his staff still in safety he scrambled aboard and grasped the lever, with a do-or-die expression on his gaunt visage.

"Break a cog if you can, boys!" added Anderson as the car once more began to rumble over the joints. "Pat is kicking himself all over at having put on breaks so soon, and he'll make his gang break their backs when he takes the irons again. It's pumping for dear life, now! We've got to make the bridge first, or fight the whole gang!"

They were already under full headway before the Freight rumbled past where the section hands had hastily dumped their two cars from the track, and Long Jim smiled grimly as he saw how much distance he had gained by exercising his cool wits. Only for a moment, then his face was cold and hard-set as before. The road was long before them, and he had already seen enough to know that extra arms can more than make up for dead weight in a long race.

"If worst comes to worst, I'll drop Pat the first," he coldly uttered, the killing strain apparently having no effect on his iron muscles. "I hate to think of it, but if they catch us up before we reach the bridge, they'll make no bones over killing us all. You know that."

The tramp groaned hollowly, but confined himself to that. He had no breath to spare in shaping the thoughts which filled his painfully throbbing brain as he bent over that terrible "pump."

Yet he must have inwardly cursed the folly which had led to all this. If he had only passed by the mocking section hands without reply or stoppage! If the food had not tempted him into pausing, or if he had kept that fatal staff closed!

"It's mighty tough on an unseasoned man, stranger," kindly uttered Anderson, misinterpreting that groan. "I know how it is tearing the windpipe out of your throat, but grin and bear it as long as you can, then lay down and take a rest."

"I'll pump—ef it—kills me!" jerked out the tramp, doggedly persisting, the big drops of sweat beginning to trickle from his thin nose and drip from his chin-tuft. "I got ye—into it—an' I'll do—my level—"

"Don't take too much blame to yourself, pardner," gravely, earnestly interposed the bridge-boss. "Pat has only been waiting for a good excuse, and you've already paid me back for what I did. He sent that pick for keeps, Pat did!"

They had sometime since rounded the curve and entered upon another straight reach of track, but though the stiff grade was now past, the car seemed to be running less swiftly. The extra work of surmounting the grade had naturally taken a good deal out of even those seasoned men, and then the great friction had used up pretty much all the oil with which the bearings had been supplied that morning.

Far sooner than he liked to see, Anderson caught sight of the enemy coming around the curve, sending savage yells before them as their longed-for prey was once more viewed. Pat McCarthy was lending one arm to the end of a brake, thus leaving only two of the thirteen men unemployed. And these, at that instant, exchanged places with other twain to permit them to catch a free breath.

"Strike her up a bit, lads," muttered Anderson, setting the example with such good will that the hat flew from the head of Sam Collins and completely blinded the panting tramp.

Anderson deftly secured and replaced the covering, then bent his broad shoulders over the lever, calling every ounce of strength into play and sending the car along at a visibly increased pace.

But none knew better than he that this could not last. His own powers might hold out, but good though his men were, he knew they could not accomplish impossibilities, and as for the stranger, he was of little service; if he was carrying his own dead weight, that was all.

"We're holding our own, I think," panted Collins, who only had to lift his eyes to note their pursuers. "Maybe we can do it!"

"What would we be worth if we did hold out to the bridge?" coldly responded Anderson, glancing backward. "They can change off, and still keep eleven men at the pumps. We are only four at—"

"Two'n a hafe—I'm wuss then—nothin'!" gasped the tramp.

"You've done better than the average, pardner, and may help us out even yet," kindly uttered the bridge-boss.

"Drop Pat when they come close enough, and the rest'll lose their heads," suggested Busby.

"If I can't stall 'em off without," nodded Anderson, frowning. "I hate to think of shooting even such an ugly cur as he is."

"My backbone's—all melted!" gasped the tramp, his head drooping limply as overtaken nature gave way to the unaccustomed strain.

Anderson caught him by an arm and lowered him to the floor, standing astride his body to prevent his jarring off before he could partly recover his wits. As he did so he spoke again:

"Ease up a bit, boys, if you like. We can't

outrun 'em, against such odds, and we've got to try a little headwork."

He was implicitly obeyed by his men, for such swift work was but little preferable to an actual conflict with the enemy, let the odds be ever so heavy. And before many rods more a taunting yell came from the powerful lungs of the section-boss.

"Reel out a line, ye babbies!" he cried, mockingly. "Wait a bit until we bump ye—hard!"

"It's your turn now, Patsy, but maybe ours is coming," muttered Jim Anderson, as he stooped over the tool-chest and extracted a small package therefrom, carefully keeping it away from the flying levers.

Busby and Collins turned a shade paler as they interchanged swift glances, but neither man uttered a word. Anderson was their boss, and they had no more right than inclination to question his actions.

The hand-car driving the flat before it was rapidly coming on, and as though confident the victory was all but won, Pat McCarthy left the lever and stooped to fill his hands with heavy iron nuts and bolts.

"Can you make out to light a cigar, pardner?" asked Anderson, stirring the crouching tramp with his foot. "If you can, take hold!"

A grimy paw uprose and caught the weed as it dropped, together with a metal match-safe. The fellow looked puzzled, as well he might, but that was no time for asking questions, and curling himself up to baffle the brisk wind created by their flight, he struck a match and deftly succeeded in the attempt to ignite the cigar handed down to him.

"Keep your distance, Pat McCarthy!" cried Anderson, while the tramp was thus engaged. "Don't crowd us too hard, or it'll fare worse with you. We're on regular business and hold the right of way."

"Howld yer granny's pet goose fer milkin'!"

"We'll match you man for man, or gang for gang, any time after hours, when, where and how you please. Crowd us now, and you've got to take what comes of it, McCarthy!"

"We'll take you foorst, thin, me dandy bucko!" jeered the ruffian.

"All lit an' smokin', boss!" uttered the tramp, looking up, resigning the cigar as Anderson reached down for it.

The bridge-boss left the brakes, facing the enemy, cold and hard, both hands held in plain view, as he sternly called out:

"I've given you fair warning, and I'd be justified in wiping you out to a man, you curs! For the last time—"

A shower of nuts and bolts cut him short, but he swiftly resumed:

"Down brake! or I'll blow up the track and wreck you all!"

CHAPTER IX.

SOLEMN SAUL CLAIMS HIS PIE.

In one hand he held the lighted cigar, in the other a stick of giant powder with fuse attached and its loose end perilously near the smoking weed, a single touch from the glowing end of which would be enough to start all that Long Jim Anderson threatened.

"Howld ahn, ye divil!" howled McCarthy, gesticulating wildly in his first moments of panic, for few men better knew what swift and sure work such a cartridge could compass.

"Hit her up a little harder, lads!" muttered the bridge-boss, as he saw their enemy cast into confusion. "Every minute counts an hour now!"

Busby and Collins bent their backs and managed to let out a fresh link, in a degree rested by their brief slackening up. There was a very slight down-grade, which made the work easier, and the "old pumper" spun merrily along, rapidly increasing the distance between the fugitives and the section gang.

McCarthy quickly recovered from the panic into which he had been cast by that stern threat and the sight of the dangerous explosive. All the sooner that he saw how the two bridge hands were bending to their lever and regaining their lost ground. He fancied he saw through the bold trick, and fairly raved with anger and chagrin.

With one hand on the lever himself, he urged his men to redoubled exertion, assuring them through his ugly oaths that there was no danger.

"Sure he knows better nor to aven think o' wreckin' the track! What w'd the comp'ny be afther sayin' to the loikes av that, annyhow? Divil the blow he'll blow at all!"

By this time the tramp had partially recovered from the effects of his bout with the pump, and was watching the movements of the enemy with growing interest, feeling that, after all, life was worth the living.

"Ef I hed the loan of a gun, boss, mebbe I could make out to hit the bigness o' the hull gang, yender," he ventured at length.

If he heard, Anderson paid no heed. Standing on the very edge of the car in order to give the rear lever free play without touching his person, and keeping his balance with an adroit ease such as few men can display under like circumstances, he was watching the gang in chase coming along

at howling speed, coolly puffing at his cigar until Pat McCarthy once more abandoned the lever to fill his hands with missiles from the flat on which he was standing.

"You will have it, Pat?" he cried out, flipping the ash from his cigar as he took it from between his lips.

"I'll have that ragged craythure out o' the grip o' ye afoor ye kin sthrip him cl'ane an' break the nick o' him, to lay the blame on yer betthers, Long Jim—so I will, now!"

The threat was viciously emphasized by a couple of whirling taps from the muscular boss, now doubly dangerous since he knew he had given his hated enemy a glimpse of the white feather but a little before.

"It's the last time, Patsy, and you'd better down brake, or else begin holding the head on your shoulders. There's such a thing as crowding a man too far, and you're crossing the limit right now!"

With the last word Jim Anderson brought the cigar and fuse together long enough to ignite the latter, holding it up where the section-boss could not help seeing the sputtering sparks it gave off in burning, and sternly shouting:

"Down brakes, you bull-headed fools! I'll lift you and your cars clean into the next county!"

Again there was something like a panic among the ruffians, and one of their number jumped on the brake without asking permission from his chief, that action itself almost resulting in a catastrophe, despite the fact that McCarthy had taken the precaution of linking the two cars together, the flat being, of course, without a brake.

Their speed was so suddenly checked that the boss lost his balance and would have fallen in front of the cars, only for the lucky grip of his men crouching on the heap of iron fittings. They barely managed to save him, and Anderson laughed aloud as he hastily wet his fingers and pinched off the end of the burning fuse.

"Jump her clean off the irons, boys!" he cried, flinging his own power into the scale, holding the cigar in his teeth and the cartridge in his free hand. "We're getting there in fine shape, after all!"

There was no response. The two gallant fellows had no breath to spare, for they knew it was yet a long stretch to the culvert, or minor bridge where their fellows were at work. And they saw that already Pat McCarthy was rallying his demoralized crew, cursing and raging like a madman.

Apparently they feared him more than they did the dynamite, or else they were convinced by his savage reasonings that Long Jim would not dare attempt to tear up the track, but was simply bluffing, for once more they crowded the double levers and sent their two cars ahead at top speed.

"Keep her bowling, boys," coolly uttered the boss, as his keen sense of hearing warned him that further delay might prove too dangerous. "I reckon the boys can hear a shot, and I think I can scare those rascals into half a fit, anyway!"

Again he turned to face the enemy, and once more, he sternly uttered his warning as he held up cigar and cartridge:

"I hate to do it, Pat, but you're bound to have it that way. Down with your brake, or I swear by heaven and hell! I'll touch her off this time in dead earnest!"

In spite of that recent trick, the reckless gang was frightened afresh, and though no one ventured to press on the brake without orders from McCarthy, they ceased to throw their weight on the levers, and almost immediately they began to lose ground again.

The section-boss fairly howled with rage at this, and seeing that he could gain nothing more through empty threats, Anderson relit the fuse and flung away his cigar, thundering at the top of his voice:

"On your own head be it, Pat! Here she comes!"

The fuse was sputtering close to the envelope containing the terrible explosive as the words passed his lips, and Long Jim hurled the cartridge with spiteful force, then whirled about to fling all his power into plying the lever.

"Tear every cog out of her if you—"

A loud explosion drowned his speech, and the man with the shells had his skull almost cracked by the lever as he raised up to note the result of the shot.

"Never tetched a clam!" he spluttered, peering through the cloud of dust and debris lifted by the explosion, for he saw that the cartridge, instead of falling on the track as might have been expected, touched the ground quite a distance to one side, tearing a great hole as it spent its force, but doing no actual injury to the road-bed.

But a swift glance backward assured Anderson that he had gained all he expected, and then he bent every muscle to his work, sending the car ahead as it had never run before.

The gang in chase had seen him throw the cartridge, but there was no time to take exact note of its course. One man jumped on the brake and then all of them tumbled off and over each other, preferring bruises and the chance of broken bones to certain annihilation.

"Put in your best licks, boys!" grated Anderson. "We've got to get there now—can't fool 'em again—not to-day, anyhow!"

Far ahead, but still to be seen, was the bridge spanning the gully where the rest of his gang was at work. Not so far but what they could hear that loud explosion, and it was with the double intention of delaying the enemy and putting his men on the alert that Anderson made use of the cartridge.

The three strong men worked as they had seldom worked before, and the heavy car sped swiftly over the irons, rapidly leaving the section-gang to the rear, though Pat McCarthy was quick to recover his wits when he found himself still sound in wind and limb. Already he was up and chasing the cars which still rolled along the rails, though at a slow pace. Already his oaths and curses were spurring his men to new exertions.

"It's a mighty tough one, but we're getting there, boys!" grimly uttered Anderson, freeing one hand for the purpose of signaling his still distant men by means of his hat. "If they'll only take the hint in time! They can do it—they must!"

Twice more he repeated his signals before satisfied that his meaning was fully understood, in the interval's gripping the lever with both hands and doing the work of two strong men.

"It'll be touch-and-go, but we'll make it, lads!" he muttered as he measured the distance before and behind them with quick glances. "Hang on by your eyelids, stranger, when you feel my foot come down!"

Thoroughly maddened by their repeated failures, the gang of toughs were pumping as they had never pumped before, savagely resolved to win in the end, let the cost be what it might. And something of this came to the fugitives in the fierce commands of Pat McCarthy.

"Crowd 'em, ye slaapy joskins! Bump 'em cl'ane to the ind o' the road! Split the gang in two, an' we'll do 'em up be sections!"

Long Jim actually laughed as he heard this, for he could see his men ranged alongside the track a few yards that side of the culvert, ready to carry out the orders he had telegraphed with his hat.

"Once more—all together!" and he made the strong lever fairly groan as he bent over it. "Hang fast all, for we're going to stop most mighty sudden!"

Swift as thought almost they whirled past the remainder of the bridge gang, with the cars of the section-gang less than a score yards behind them; but that was quite sufficient.

"Knock thim indways av they thry to stop!" howled McCarthy.

He had time to say no more, for the instant the leading car passed them by, the bridge hands bent to their bars, and fairly tore one end of the rail from its loosened fastenings, then sprung out of danger themselves, just as the two cars were derailed, pitching down the steep bank, the men flying in every direction, like leaves in a whirlwind!

Long Jim Anderson jumped on the brake the instant his car passed in safety over the loosened rail, quickly checking its speed, and coming to a halt just across the gully.

"Jump her off, lads, and we'll see what Patsy has to say about it!"

The car was quickly derailed, and before one-half of the section hands could pick themselves up from where the sudden shock had hurled them, Anderson had his men in line and ready for what might offer.

One of the fellows lay groaning among the rocks at the bottom of the ditch, and it was plain to see that he had fared badly. All of the others were more or less bruised and battered, and Pat McCarthy looked as though he had been wrestling with a cyclone!

"I'll be the death o' ye, Long Jim!" he spluttered, spitting out a loosened tooth, and trying to clear his nearly blinded eyes of dust and dirt as he came staggering up the bank.

"Go a little slow, Patsy," was the cold retort. "You're on my kingdom now, and if you couldn't stop for the danger-flag, don't blame us for your getting wrecked."

"We'll b'ate ye foorst an' talk aftherwards, ye dirty scut! Up wid be, byes! Up, an' we'll ate 'em up loike!"

"Stop right where you are, Pat!" sharply cried Anderson, his revolver flashing in the sunlight as it covered the maddened Irishman. "If you throw your bulldogs at my men, I'll lay you out too cold to skin! If you must have a row, I'll thrask you quick enough. Or I'll take any two of your best men, if you're afraid of your own bones!"

"Sufferin' grandpap!" and the man with the shells shuffled forward, staff in hand. "Ef they hes to be a row, what's the matter with Solemn Saul? Didn't it all start 'long o' him? Be course it did! An' though I'm all broken to pieces, spittin' cotton, seein' blue stars an' green moons all over the two eyes o' me, I'm able fer to stick up fer my own lawful rights—I be so! It's my pie, an' I kin lick the fu'st bodacious critter as tries fer to sneak all the plums out o' it!"

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded Anderson, facing him.

"Ef you want a bloomin' champion fer to lick the pick o' that scurvy gang, yar she am, head up an' tail a-risin' clean over the dash!"

"Take him up, boss, an' I'll break him clean in two pieces!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SAD MAN FROM SAN, SABA.

THE speaker was one of the section-hands; a tall, muscular, black-bearded fellow with an evil eye and cruel mouth. Despite the awkward roll and tumble in which he had shared with his fellows, his movements were quick and free, and he looked the dangerous antagonist all over.

"Tell 'im yes, Patsy Bolivar, ef he's so p'izen mean ye want to git clean shet o' him," briskly chipped in Solemn Saul, as he termed himself, though the name seemed illy placed, just then.

His rest on the hand-car, added to that which he had taken since, apparently made him as good as new, and the prospect of a tussle seemed to brighten his melancholy countenance up wonderfully.

McCarthy hesitated, feeling himself in an awkward situation. He was confronted by an equal force of good men, while he could not help seeing that his own gang was demoralized by their ugly tumble. Long Jim still held his revolver in hand, and he felt a disagreeable certainty that the bridge-boss would put his threat into execution if crowded any further. He was on his own ground now, and McCarthy was the intruder.

"He'll break your neck, stranger," warningly muttered Anderson, taking advantage of this pause and speaking aside. "Fall back, and I'll bluff the flannel-mouths off too quick!"

"It'll be money in my pocket ef he does splatter me clean all over forty acres, boss," with an abrupt return to his sad whine. "Let him do it, ef you think you owe me anythin' fer—salty tears o' mournful mis'ry!" he groaned as, in obedience to a sulky nod from Pat McCarthy, the champion of the section-gang stepped briskly forward.

"Wait a bit, Johnny Duane," interposed Anderson, emphasizing his command with the muzzle of his gun. "If the stranger is willing to meet you, I reckon we'd better settle what's to be the penalty for the loser."

"Lave that to the wan that wins," hastily cried McCarthy.

"Then your chicken wants to do his crowin' afore I buckle to him, Patsy Bolivar!" confidently chipped in Solemn Saul, laying aside his staff and doffing his refractory hat lest its brim blind him at a critical moment. "I hain't lost my gaffs ef my tail-feathers is all gone to glory and ruin in a whirly gust o' crooked luck! Nominate your punishment, pardner, an' say your prayers afore ye begin, I beg o' ye!"

"Rough an' tumble's good enough fer me!" laughed the fellow, at the same time leaping forward and closing with the tramp before he had a chance to use his fists.

Closed—and parted!

For an instant it seemed as though athletic rascal was fairly crushing Solemn Saul to the road-bed by main force, but before McCarthy could give vent to the yell of vicious exultation which rose in his throat, there was a change as complete as it was startling.

The section-hand lost his footing, his feet flying up into the air after a curious fashion, and he was flung end over end clear of the tramp and down the steep slope, where he fell with an ugly sound among a litter of rocks and brush.

"Pick him up an' glue his legs on, critters!" cried Solemn Saul, leaping high into the air and cracking his heels together as he sent out a shrill, ear-splitting crow. "Sufferin' grandpap! they's ba'm in Gilead yit, an' I jest knows it! I hain't hed so much fun sence—trot up the next best dough-boy, an'—"

"Enough is enough, and we've had too much already!" sharply interposed Anderson. "Go pick up your fellow, Pat, and pull out as quick as you know how. What he's got, I'm ready to give you. Don't make me do it, though, if you've any love for your own neck."

"It's the bargain he made that saves you further trouble, Long Jim," coldly muttered the section boss, his brogue vanishing with his outward excitement. "Look after him, two of you, and the rest right the pumper. Lively, now!"

Silent, subdued, seemingly cowed by the fall of their champion and the sudden change which had come over their boss, the gang obeyed. The fellow was insensible, and made no sign as he was picked up, but it was clear enough that one arm and one leg was broken, if nothing worse.

"Better run him down to Quivering Asp, McCarthy," said Anderson gravely, as he saw how seriously the fellow was injured. "I'll be in at dusk, ready to tell how it all came about, in case you should make any mistake in the facts."

The two injured men were placed on the flat, in as easy positions as possible, and the others got aboard as McCarthy waved his hand. Not a word did he utter until the cars were under motion, but then he looked back with viciously-shaking fist as he growled:

"Ye go free the day, ye thrampin' 'posthur, but I'll aven up wid ye afore the ind, av I have to count ivery tie in the wide land, so I will! Paint that in big black litters on the back o' ye, until I kin foind a chance to woipe 'em out, will ye?"

There was no reply, and as Anderson looked around to see what had become of the stranger, he saw him sitting at the end of the bridge, his gaunt face hidden in his hands as his elbows rested on his doubled-up legs, the picture of silent sorrow or misery.

"What's the matter, pardner?" gently asked the bridge boss, touching those rounded shoulders, his honest face betraying something of the deep interest which this curious character had awakened in him. "You didn't strain yourself, I hope? Though it looked a job big enough for half a dozen men of your build, too."

"Tain't that—wuss luck," groaned the tramp, his frame shivering as with strong emotion.

"Is it anything I can help? You've earned more this day than I'll be able to pay off in a year, pardner, but I'm mighty anxious to make a start toward clearing accounts. What's gone wrong?"

"What hain't gone wrong? What hain't twisted up too crooked fer a cross-eyed man to even look the same way 'thout turnin' his peepers outside in an' double-eendways? Everythin's gone contrariwise, an' me the wu'st o' the boodle! The hull world is out o' j'int, an' I'm a pore lost sinner too low down fer any use—waal, now, I jest be, pardner."

Solemn Saul lifted his head and gazed with lack-luster eyes into the puzzled but sympathetic face of the bridge boss.

"Then I can't do anything for you?" he persisted.

"Kin you patch up a brain that's gone clean crazy from woe an' trials an' trib'lations? Kin you lift up a bitter black cuss from a weak an' sufferin' sinner? Kin you— Your name hain't Bildad Barzilla Bird?" with a sudden flash of light in his little gray eyes.

"I'm Jim Anderson, and—"

"I knowed it, but I hed to ax, all the same. It's part o' the penalty I've got to pay fer thinkin' I knowed more then a smarter critter then I was," gloomily muttered the queer fellow, staring vacantly down at the rocks on which his antagonist had fared so hardly. "Ef I was to run chuck up ag'inst a she-angel on the wing, I'd hev to ax was she Bildad Barzilla Bird! Ef I was to meet the Old Boy—waal," with a doleful sigh, as his tow head shook gloomily, "I'm comin' to that fast a plenty! I'll run up ag'inst the forked-tail critter afore many more days, fer I cain't keep on this mis'able way much longer; no, sir, I jest cain't, now! Nur I don't want, nuther!"

Jim Anderson hesitated for a brief space, thoroughly puzzled what to make of this dusty, weather-worn enigma in human shape. Then, as a ray of the sun reflected from a polished dinner-pail caught his eye, he brightened up a little. He knew how great a difference a full stomach will sometimes make in a man, and he said briskly:

"You're hungry, pardner, and I reckon you'll feel better after a bite or two. It's long odds the boys have left grub enough for two in their pails, yonder. Come and keep me company for a bit, won't you?"

With almost ludicrous agility Solemn Saul leaped to his feet, but as his polished staff fell clattering at his feet, the old shadow fell over his face again, and with a lugubrious whine, he slipped the ring around and drove the spiked end into a tie.

"I've got to do it, pardner! Got to!" he groaned, as he lowered his ingenious table and produced shells and black pea. "I couldn't swaller a bite ef I didn't airn it this way. Pick out the little joker, but I'll cheat ye ef I kin, an'—didn't I tell ye so?"

More than half-believing the poor fellow was cracked, if not actually crazed, Anderson cut his deft manipulations short, turning up one of the shells to find the space vacant.

"Then I've lost the grub, and you're a dinner in—or will be, as soon as your jaws can get away with it," laughed the bridge-boss, clapping the tramp on his shoulder and gently urging him toward the little pile of timbers on the further side of the gully.

"Fer I hed to cheat ye," dolefully persisted Solemn Saul, turning up another shell and showing the little ball fastened to its inner top. "That's the wu'st of it all! I've got to cheat even my best fri'nds, ef so mis'able critter kin jestly claim any sech as them!"

"If they don't any of them kick harder than I am, little harm done on either side," laughed Anderson, rummaging briskly among the tins.

He managed to find enough fragments to satisfy even the hungriest of tramps, and placing all before Solemn Saul, he made a fair pretense of keeping him company, though he had already eaten a dinner.

"You don't happen to be Bildad Barzilla Bird, pardner?" he jokingly asked, after a brief silence, which was fully improved by the tramp, greatly to the detriment of the provisions. "My name's Anderson."

"Mine's Saul Sunday, otherwise Solemn Saul,

fer bein' so turrible brisk an' lively an' light-hearted!" with a muffled groan that found it no easy task to issue through the huge mouthful of food which just then blocked the way. "Ef that ain't long enough, jest tack onto it the tail o' Sad Man from San Saba."

"Sunday is good enough for me," laughed Anderson, still puzzled by this queer customer. "You're looking for a man named Bird, then? Who is he? What is he? Maybe I can help you get on his track."

"No you cain't, nuther," and Solemn Saul shook his head with even deeper gloom written all over his gaunt face. "Nobody cain't. 'Cause why: they ain't no sech pusson as Bildad Barzilla Bird!"

"Yet you say you are hunting for him!" ejaculated Anderson.

"I hev to—wuss luck me! I hev to keep trampin' ontel I do find the p'izen critter. I hev to keep on axin' will this feller or that feller or t'other feller be Bildad Barzilla Bird. An' all the lonesome time I cain't do nothin' nur say nothin' nur eat, drink, sleep or keep eyes open 'thout fingerin' them durned ole wormy shells an' bit o' wax to see ef I will or ef I won't—wuss luck me!"

Swiftly poured this out, the tramp even forgetting to eat in his growing excitement, his gray eyes glowing and rolling, his long face seeming to increase in length as the big veins swelled and stood out in relief over his temples. But with the last words, supplemented by a doleful groan, his head lowered over the food and he resumed his feeding—it could hardly be called eating—as though fairly famishing.

In silence Anderson sat gazing upon the tramp, thoroughly puzzled to understand him. At times he felt sure the fellow must be crazy, after a fashion, but then as he recalled how promptly and skillfully Solemn Saul had interposed to save his life on two different occasions, he was forced to abandon this idea.

Was there any truth in his wild rigmarole? Was he indeed a rude and half-civilized prototype of the Wandering Jew? Or was he simply playing a part for his own amusement?

Hardly the last, considering how deeply it had gotten him into trouble that day! And yet—

"Nur all that ain't the wu'st!" added Solemn Saul so abruptly as to give the musing bridge-boss quite a start. "I've bu'sted my sacred vow all to thunder an' back ag'in! Back yender, when that p'izen critter pitched his pick at ye; never stopped to 'sult the little joker ef I should knock it to one side, or let it punch ye clean full o' holes!"

"Lucky for me that you didn't!" laughed Anderson, shortly.

"An' ag'in when that long-geared critter wanted to break me in two pieces," groaned the penitent. "Wuss yit, fer I hed time a-plenty, yit I never even thunk o' provin' it! Ef I on'y hed—weepin' grief!"

CHAPTER XI.

IS THERE METHOD IN HIS MADNESS?

SOLEMN SAUL broke off with a groan so hollow, so doleful, so full of inexpressible misery that it actually seemed to double him up, cramp fashion, and for the moment deprive him of his appetite.

Anderson drew back a little, his sympathetic face clouding. If the tramp from Texas was really an unfortunate, it was a pity he permitted his tongue such free swing, turning into burlesque what was apparently meant for pathos.

"What lay are you on, anyway, pardner?" the bridge-boss abruptly asked, his tones changed quite as much as his facial expression. "What do you expect to gain by trying to run the rig on me?"

Solemn Saul slowly turned on his seat until they were face to face, his the image of meek, long-enduring suffering, with just a tinge of reproach in his little gray eyes.

In perfect silence he emptied his hands of the fragments, putting all that remained into the tin pail at his side and carefully fitting on its cover, guided by the sense of touch alone. Not until then did his mournfully reproachful gaze falter, or his locked jaws part sufficiently to pronounce:

"I knowed it'd come, stranger, sir, but I kep' tryin' to hope as how she wouldn't. It's part o' the cuss that critter piled onto me fer bein' sech a dumb fool as to—sufferin' grandpaw and weepin' Jemima Jane! hain't it bin jes' so clean from the set-off? Hain't it panned out jes' so from the time I tuck up my never-endin' pilg' image 'way down yen' on the sunny bank o' the San Saba? 'Deed she has, an' I reckoned I'd growed used to bein' tuck fer a crazy bedbug on two laigs, or a perambulating 'postor on shanks' mar', or a— Pile it up an' shake it down an' fill 'er up clean 'bove the sideboards, stranger, fer ef I cain't stan' it I'd orter—by this lonesome time!"

When he began speaking, Solemn Saul was sitting erect, squarely facing the bridge-boss, his voice clear if melancholy. As he proceeded his head gradually lowered, his shoulders rounding, his body slowly turning as on an imperceptible pivot, his tones growing lower and

meeker until they died out in a soft sigh and he sat in a limp heap on the timbers, gazing gloomily at vacancy. Each breath was a feeble sigh, and seemed unable to escape without first giving that long head a gentle motion to the right and back again.

Was he really in full possession of his senses? Was he playing a part, as Anderson felt more than half-convinced? If so, why should he take so much trouble to maintain his mask while alone with a friend?

"If I have really wronged you, pardner," he began, finding it no easy task to find the proper words, for he could not forget that to this non-descript he really owed his life.

"Never mention it, stranger, sir," softly replied the Sad Man from San Saba. "It was writ' down that way when I fell from grace, an' you couldn't do diff'rent ef you was to try up to b'iler-bu'stin'. I was a bigger fool then the law 'lows fer tryin' to make it come out any other way, but I won't spring the same trap no more—never no more, stranger, sir!"

"Say we drop it for good and all, then? It's enough for me to know that you saved me an ugly rap from Pat's pick, and—"

"Ef I mought ax a favor, stranger, bein' as you 'pear to think I done ye a sarvice?" hesitated the man with the shells.

"Only saving my life," grimly smiled the bridge-boss. "Ask what you please, Sunday, and it's yours, ef I can make it so."

"Mebbe it won't loom up so mighty big in the two eyes o' ye," was the addition, with another melancholy sigh. "But ef I manidge to make one good man see me as I really be—the sufferin' wictim o' wicious wiles an' venomous witchcraft—fer ef it ain't more'n any common hoodoo, I don't want a cent."

Solemn Saul gave his spiked staff a vicious jab in the dry ground at his feet, nervously fingering the bright ring which held its split top securely in place. He seemed on the point of relapsing into his former state of gloomy meditation, but with a toss of his head that made his old hat flutter its rusty wings, he wheeled about and squarely faced the nonplused bridge-boss.

"Time was when never a gamecock in all the happy wallies o' San Saba hed a lustier cockadoodle than Saul Sunday. Time was when he could rake a wing 'round all the plumpest pullets in any an' every yard from eend to eend o' that walk; an' it wasn't measured by little stingy miles, nuther, ye want to mind, stranger. From whar the San Saba started in the teeniest dew-drop fresh from heaven or the clouds—I ain't werry hefty on the 'way-up ologies, pardner," meekly. "From head to mouth, from top to bottom, through more caounties then it's airly in the day 'nough fer to spen' time a-countin', stranger, sir, I was cock o' the walk, an' hed to paint my gills an' cork my gaffs afore I could git up anythin' like a fly out o' the rest o' the chickens. Time was—but it hain't like that no longer—no it ain't, now."

Saul Sunday wagged his tow-head mournfully, sighing like a bellows as he reflected on his past and faded glory. And it was with a visible effort that he smothered his emotions sufficiently to proceed:

"Ef I hedn't bloated up so bodacious big with pride an' the like o' that, stranger, sir, mebbe I mought 'a' b'in crowin' thar by San Saba till yit; but it wasn't my luck. They was a hoodoo writ' out in mighty black letters, jest a-waitin' fer me, an' I was durn fool 'nough to fly off o' my own dung-hill an' go huntin' it up—I jest was, pardner."

"The best of us will make a mistake once in a while, pardner."

"But my whiles come so mighty awful clost up ag'inst each other, or I wouldn't be gruntin' so loud over it," groaned the sad man, wagging his head afresh. "An' I run into the botheration the very fu'st day I hit Santone. Didn't even hev time to drink a teeny bottle, nur to give more'n hafe a dozen San Saba cockadoodles on the hafe-shell! An' I was jest green 'nough fer to take him fer a crazy slouch, too drunk fer to know which eend he was standin' onto. I did, stranger! I give it to ye fer a melancholy fac'!"

"Steered up against a brace, eh?" smiled Anderson.

Solemn Saul picked up his staff and eyed it with intense disgust and loathing, slipping the polished ring around until the velvet table was formed.

"That's the riggin', pardner, an' yer's the wormy ole shells an' the measley runt of a black-mass pill! I tuck it in gross doses at a swaller, too! I jes' did! An' all the time the p'izen critter which I'd picked up as a flat, was warnin' me that he'd cheat me clean home an' back ag'in! But I didn't b'lieve him. An' I bucked up ag'inst his own game. An' I lost every ducat I hed in my kicks. An' I cut open my belt an' piled out the yallerboys. An' I picked up the wrong shell, to be course!"

"Hard luck, pardner, but—you thought you'd get even by playing the same old game?" amusedly ventured the bridge-boss.

"Wuss then that—wuss then all that ten double times over, stranger, sir!" with a groan that seemed to come from his very boots. "It was all a p'izen hoodoo, but I never knowed it

when they was time fer to back out! That pore shack in seemin' was the Ole Boy in kiver, an' I'm tellin' ye why I knows it so mighty sart'in, boss."

"Sez he: 'I'll play ye yer losses 'g'inst yer time, stranger. Ef I wins,' sez he, 'you're to take solemn davy you'll work at whatever I bid ye,' sez he, 'ontel you git word to quit or find the man I want to onkiver,' sez he. An' I was jes' plum' crazy 'nough to 'gree to it."

"And lost, of course?"

"That was whar the hoodoo come in hefty," nodded the tramp, in grim resignation. "An' then the devil he give me these doin's an' tole me I was to turn myself into a perambulating search-warrant ontel I ketched a man named Bildad Barzilla Bird. An' to make sure I didn't waste no more time then I hed to, he swore me to do an' act as you've seen an' hearn me this day! All I wanted I hed to git through these hoodooed tools! No matter ef I hed the money to pay, I hed to go through the motions, on penalty o' losin' all I hed left o' my own: the soul that's growin' monstrous tired an' sick o' livin' inside o' sech a mis'able shell, stranger—yes, it is, small blame to it nuther!"

Solemn Saul viciously closed his staff, and averted his face as though unwilling to expose his strong emotions.

Anderson gazed at the queer fellow, more thoroughly puzzled than ever, though he could hardly bring himself to think Saul Sunday was really crazy. And yet—if not crack-brained, he must be an impostor, playing a difficult part! For what ends? Why select such a peculiar role, which could only result in attracting attention to his movements wherever he wandered?

It was an enigma beyond his solving without plenty of time for analysis, and after a little, Long Jim Anderson gave over trying. For the present it was sufficient to know that this uncouth fellow had rendered him valuable service, and he was eager to repay it in kind if he could find the proper opening for so doing.

"You've had mighty hard luck, pardner, from your story," he said, one hand gently touching the shoulder of the sad man. "I'd like to give you a lift out of the mud if I could only see the right way. You don't mind matching your fingers against my eyes again, for your own figures? I reckon I could catch the little joker this trial!"

But Solemn Saul shook his head mournfully as it turned until his little gray eyes met those frank brown orbs, and a bony hand gripped the fingers of the bridge-boss.

"You mean mighty well, stranger, sir, but I ain't so p'izen low-down as all that comes to—no I ain't, now! I've got wealth 'nough to see me through a mile or two funder, an' that's plenty fer a hog!"

"You wera headed toward Quivering Asp; are you going there?"

"It's a burg I've never s'arched, an' I've got to do it," with a groan of utter disgust. "I've got to ax ef they's ary sech critter in the town as Bildad Barzilla Bird, even ef I'm dead sart'in they ain't an' never was nur never will be sech a man as all them!"

"It's a curious name, and I think I'd have heard of it if any such person lived in Quivering Asp; but if you're bound to make the trip, you're more than welcome to ride with us when we knock off work."

"Sufferin' grandpaw an' lamentin' mother-in-law!" gasped Solemn Saul, with a shuddering glance toward the "pumper" hard by. "That ingyne o' tortur'! Me? Ag'in? An' I hain't yit quit seein' blue stars an' green moons an' breathin' melted fire o' brimstone an' stink-weed! Me go melt the backbone o' me ontel it runs down an' overflows my boots, pumpin' on that 'farnal machine? Sufferin' grandpaw o' sin an' sorror!"

Long Jim could not help laughing, so completely did this grotesque outburst recall the day when he took his first trail at the double-levers on a long stretch. He was thoroughly "seasoned" now, but from that experience he could dimly realize what the poor devil must have suffered during that race for life.

"But I don't ask you to work your passage, pardner," he exclaimed, as soon as he could fairly control his voice. "You've earnt that already, and the ride will be pleasant enough, once you get used to the motion in open air."

Still Solemn Saul looked dubious, now at the "pumper," then into the face of the bridge-boss, to wander across to where the hands were busily working to leave all things in order; the next day being the Sabbath.

"If you have any qualms about it, why not call up the little joker and settle it that way?" suggested Anderson, humoring the tramp in his crazy notions as far as he knew how. "I'll bet you'll have to pump your passage clear to town, and if I don't turn up the pill, you win."

Solemn Saul scrambled to his feet and crossed the bridge, planting his staff and opening his table before dolefully uttering:

"Bet they hain't ary critter in the gang that'll stake the work he's doin' now ag'inst a double sheer o' pumpin' to town, an' ef I win I'll fill his job the best I knows how! Who says yes? But I've got to cheat ye ef I kin, mind

that, now!" and he mechanically began shifting the shells and fingering the little joker.

"I'm your huckleberry!" cried Sam Collins, in obedience to a nod from the boss, turning up the first shell he could reach.

"It's your pump, an' I never won a better bet!" grinned Sunday.

CHAPTER XII.

LESLIE KELSO TRIES AN EXPERIMENT.

THE kid-gloved sport stood watching the tall gambler as Selby Haslam forced him across the threshold. His thin lips curled in a cold sneer at that parting threat, for whatever his faults, and they were legion, the young blood was no physical coward.

Leslie Kelso turned toward the still pale maiden, lifting his hat and smiling blandly as he murmured gently:

"I beg your pardon most humbly, Miss Cramer, for such a disgraceful scene, but I really couldn't help striking the rascal when I saw—you are not really injured?"

Tina Cramer shook her curly head, a tinge of color coming back to her cheeks as she met that admiring gaze.

"Not at all, thank you, sir. He had been drinking, or he would not have dared—It's all right, papa!" her tones clearer as Josh Cramer came hurriedly toward the desk, having been in the kitchen when her wild scream of mingled indignation and fright startled him.

Leslie Kelso drew back a pace or two, one hand swiftly rising to his tell-tale lips as he heard that title. This was the man who called Tina Cramer daughter? How much of the truth did he know or even suspect?

A quick gleam of satisfaction shot into his dark eyes as he noted the manner of man with whom he expected to deal; as he saw how simple, so almost childish the proprietor of Mother's Kitchen looked, though it was plain enough his sensibilities were strong, at least where the girl he called daughter was concerned.

For a brief space he was in doubt whether or no he should hasten after his lawyer and adviser, lest he should say or do something which might disturb the plans already laid by that wily schemer; but there was a vein of strong self-will in his composition, and he decided to remain as he had intended from the first.

As though reluctant to linger within earshot of father and child while their emotions were so deeply awakened, Leslie Kelso drew still further back, glancing to the rear of the long apartment where he noted a vacant table. Rightly conjecturing this would prove best for the purpose which was dimly shaping itself in his busy brain, he quietly made his way thither, simply bowing his thanks for the little chorus of approval which came from the guests in recognition of his gallant behavior.

Electing the seat which would permit him to watch the length of the room without too openly betraying his espial, Leslie Kelso coolly began his study of father and daughter, the light from door and windows throwing them both into strong relief.

Despite the enthusiastic comments of his lawyer, Kelso was poorly prepared to find such a marvel as he now looked upon through his half-closed lips. Never before had he met with such an attractive little face, though he had seen scores of handsomer ones, dozens more classically beautiful.

"A little ruby—a jewel set in clay!" involuntarily flashed across his brain, though the fancy brought a slight touch of color into his darkly sallow face.

He had expected to find something so vastly different! He could hardly have explained why he should, though, since the mother—if this sparkling little beauty was really the long-lost child on whose life or death depended such a vast fortune—was herself of no common degree of beauty in her younger days, before sorrow and wrongs and cruel disappointment came to rob her face of its soft bloom and waste her perfect figure.

Only interrupted by a servant who came to take his order, Leslie Kelso continued his watch, noting each change in father and daughter, discreetly bowing his head and veiling his eyes with their lashes as he saw them both looking toward him. Plainly as though he could catch the words she breathed, he knew Tina Cramer was urging her parent to go and thank the man who had saved her from the brutal clutches of drunken Sam Hill.

Shortly afterward he saw the fat little landlord approaching his table, doubtless in order to carry out the instructions of the little beauty, but Kelso was in no haste to smooth the way for the flushed and embarrassed father, calmly eating as though he mistook the owner for one of his waiters.

It was no easy task for one of his bashful, retiring, timid disposition, but Josh Cramer finally managed to break the ice, and then his words came fluently enough.

"She's all I've got to love—leaving out Sally—my wife, if you please, sir!" hastily correcting himself. "And she tells me you saved her from insult if nothing worse! I thank you, sir—thank you from the very bottom of my heart, sir!"

"Never mention it, my dear sir," smilingly replied Kelso, returning that hearty pressure with simulated warmth. "It cost me nothing—beyond a bursted glove! And I am amply repaid for that by the comical picture the rascal made as he toppled over in a heap. Say no more, my dear fellow, I beg of you!"

"But how can I help it?" spluttered honest Josh, his round face as rosy as a peony. "I can't offer you money, nor—"

"Well, hardly that," a little coldly interposed Kelso, the forced smile fading out of his face. "But if you really insist on putting your gratitude in a more substantial form, please send me up a bottle of fairly decent wine, will you?"

"Indeed I will, and mighty glad I can honestly recommend it too!" cried Josh Cramer, almost tripping over his own feet in his eagerness to do even this little to reward his guest for the service done his idolized daughter.

"It won't be hard to pump him," sneered Kelso beneath his breath, with a brief glance after the fat proprietor. But will it pay? Will I be upsetting any of the plans formed by Haslam? Curse the glib rascal!" frowning blackly. "Why couldn't he talk right out, instead of making such a mystery about nothing? Only that I'd be the worst sufferer myself, it would tickle me half to death just to muddle his cunningly laid wires—it just would!"

During the interval—for hurried as had been his departure, Josh Cramer was some little time in finding his way back with the bottle of wine—the brain of the schemer was busy indeed. Naturally of a suspicious nature, he had never fully trusted Selby Haslam, though in a manner forced to employ him on such an important mission.

"Is he playing a square game? Isn't he stock-ing the cards to suit his own pocket best? He would if he could, but this looks straight enough on top; the little beauty is enough like that picture to have sat for it herself! Even if she isn't the real Jacobs, she might readily be passed off for such by one who knows as much about the secret as I do! And—why shouldn't it turn that way?"

The very thought startled him, and his dark eyes shone with a reddish light as they gazed at the dainty little cashier at her desk.

Why not, indeed! It would not be nearly so dangerous, and—well, such a girl for a wife ought to make life better worth living.

Leslie Kelso went no further just then, for Josh Cramer came panting with the wine, excusing his long delay in terms which Kelso cut short, smilingly adding:

"Now complete the discharge of your fancied debt, dear sir, by sitting down and joining me in a glass. I hate to drink alone, and my friend has not yet returned from carrying off that drunken rascal."

Josh Cramer tried to excuse himself, but Kelso would not permit him to escape. Since that wild fancy shot into his mind, he was more than ever anxious to set at rest all doubts as to Tina being the real or only adopted child of the Cramers.

They emptied one glass together, but even then Kelso would not hear to the proprietor leaving. His face grew grave and he forced a troubled look into his dark eyes as he slowly uttered:

"Do you know, Mr. Cramer, I have heard of you before?"

Josh gave a start, paling and flushing, looking more like a deep-dyed criminal on the verge of arrest rather than the thoroughly honest little fellow which he really was.

"Heard of me, sir? I don't—I reckon—" "I don't think I could have made a mistake," added Kelso, his fertile brain helping him out as he went along. "It was the rather peculiar title of your establishment which first attracted my attention—for, rather queerly, I had just been dreaming of my mother's kitchen, as I dozed in the car; they had abominable food at the last station! And then I distinctly heard the name of Cramer—Josh Cramer!"

"I don't know—" stammered the little man, helplessly.

"It all slipped my mind until my lawyer, Selby Haslam, mentioned your place, when it flashed back and I resolved to seek you out and let you know what I overheard. This is the main substance, dear sir:

"Two rough-looking fellows were talking just in front of me. They mentioned this restaurant, yourself, your daughter, I believe; at least they spoke of some person named Tina."

"What—what of her?" tremblingly gasped the little man.

"They must have been lying, or greatly misinformed, for they said the girl called Tina was not really your own child, but an adopted—My dear sir, you are ill!"

"No—go on—a lie—all a lie!" gasped Josh Cramer, shivering like one with a palsy, despite his desperate effort to regain his wonted composure. Ha! ha! not my—The idea!"

"So I believe, but, all the same, those rascals declared she was only an adopted child, and that at least one of her rightful parents still lived. They hinted something at blackmailing somebody—you, I presume, though I failed to learn

more, as they left at a station just as they go so far along with the story."

Kelso cut his plausible lies shorter than he had at first intended, for he had already made his point. Despite the hysterical denial and forced laughter of Cramer, he was satisfied that Tina was not really his own daughter. And if not—surely Selby Haslam had run down his game!

Kelso had intended dilating further, and possibly dwelling on the danger of exposing Tina to such possible insults as the one which he had so promptly avenged, but having gained all the information he wished without that trouble, he concluded not to say anything more which might lead Cramer to guard his cashier more jealously.

As soon as he could contrive it, Josh Cramer broke away from the table and hastened to his usual refuge; to Sally, the wife of his bosom.

"Good-by, gentle idiot," softly sneered Kelso as he also rose from the table and leisurely sauntered toward the cashier's desk. "Pleasant dreams be thine, if my little spider don't turn to a nighthawk!"

The long room was nearly deserted just then, for Kelso had lingered long at table, and the evening was advancing. If possible, Tina Cramer looked even more charming under the lamp-light than in the sober gray of twilight, and during his brief walk to the desk, Leslie Kelso found time to start the foundation for an air castle of no mean dimensions.

"Why not? I might hunt the wide world over without finding a girl to more nearly meet my ideal. And then I ought to have earned a fair start by knocking that hulking brute down!"

"My bill, please, Miss Cramer?" he smiled as he reached the low railing and gazed with respectful admiration into that rosy face and lustrous eyes. "I had a choice bottle of wine in addition to the regular course—and both were simply perfect, if you will permit me to say so," with a graceful bow.

"There is nothing to pay," blushed Tina, her eyes drooping. "We are still deeply in your debt, and father would never forgive me were I to take money from you. Indeed, sir, if I might beg of you to make this your home during your stay in town? If—"

She broke off abruptly with a faint cry and a burning blush of joy as a tall form entered the room to clasp her extended hands. And closely following came a shambling fellow who paused before Kelso, uttering in a dolefully lugubrious tone:

"I say, stranger, your name don't happen to be Bildad Barzilla Bird?"

CHAPTER XIII.

"NOTHER GOOD MAN GONE WRONG!"

LESLIE KELSO gave a start at that touch, and then impatiently knocked the grimy hand from his arm, hardly so much as glancing at its owner, so deeply interested was he in this fresh phase of the game he was playing; this meeting between Tina Cramer and—could it be a lover?

"I knowed ye wasn't Bildad Barzilla Bird, stranger, sir," again came that subdued, melancholy snuffle from close beside the young blood. "I knowed they never was nur never won't be no sech p'izen critter as Bildad Barzilla Bird atop o' the footstool. But, allee samee, I hed to ax ye ef you wasn't, pardner, an' I've got to keep a-pokin' of that same at ye ontel I ketch some sort o' answer ef— Eh?"

"Go to the devil, will you?" angrily grated Kelso, turning upon the persistent fellow with flashing eyes and flushing cheeks.

Not born of that persistence, however. With each passing moment of watching, his first suspicion that these two people were indeed lovers grew deeper and stronger until it became almost conviction. And the discovery sent a pain through the organ which he was wont to call his heart, such as he had never felt before on account of a woman.

Solemn Saul shrunk back from that dangerous-looking front, mechanically lifting his staff-hand to guard his head, but his voice was too sad and meekly-resigned for exhibiting either fear or indignation at this rude repulse.

"How kin I help it, stranger, sir? Hain't he got a morgidge onto me, soul, body an' britches? Hain't the time o' grace runnin' out every day, an' every hour, an' every minnit, an' every—Sufferin' grandpap o' sin an' sorer an' misery-ation!" his doleful tones barely tinged with feeble indignation as he added: "Hain't that a plenty, 'thout every pesky squirt an' perfumed counter-jumper tryin' to hurry me up with a kick down? Hain't they never no sense o' right, an' marcy, an'—"

"Pull the little joker and play to see which shall wipe out the monstrous insult, Saul o' the Solomon!" laughingly cried jolly Will Busby, whose foot just touched the threshold. "Snail I hold your hat, sir?" with an innocent stare into the flushing face of the stranger.

That was an instant of ugly temptation for Leslie Kelso, and for just that long it was doubtful if his answer would not come in the shape of a double blow similar to the stroke which had sent Sam Hill toppling over to measure his length on the floor of Mother's Kitchen.

"Mr. Kelso, will you please—"

That soft voice turned the scale, and as though it had not reached his ears, the young man quickly brushed past Solemn Saul, Busby and Collins, leaving the restaurant without another word.

"Shall I follow and hail him, Tina?" asked Long Jim Anderson, but waiting for permission before leaving his present position.

Tina hesitated for a brief space, her pretty brows wrinkling just the least bit in the world, but then they cleared again. After all, he was but a passing stranger. And she had already thanked him for the timely service he had rendered. And if—What right had he to scowl so blackly just because—

"Never mind, Jim," her voice sinking deliciously low and shy as she pronounced that familiar name. "I only wanted to introduce you, for— But I'll explain more clearly when there's nobody by."

"As you will, Tina. But that reminds me," and the bridge-boss turned to look after his disreputable looking *protege*, Solemn Saul, finding the man from San Saba gazing mournfully upon them, his head slowly wagging to and fro as though he sadly disagreed with their evident happiness. "I've got quite a little bit to tell you, too, and I can't make a better beginning than by introducing a new-found friend; Saul Sunday, Tina," turning with the hand of the sad man gripped in his. "This is Miss Cramer, Saul, and you'll always be sure of a cordial welcome in her house as long as you care to stop in Quivering Asp."

"Sarvant to command, mum, as fur's bad luck'll let me go," uttered Solemn Saul, bobbing his head repeatedly, apparently too shy and abashed for fairly meeting those bright eyes or accepting the proffered hand.

"Brace up, pardner," laughed Anderson, bringing the strongly contrasting hands together and holding them between his own strong palms. "She's not awful, if she is a giantess! He's a diamond in the rough, Tina, and only for his ready hands and quick wit, you'd hardly be listening to my chatter this evening!"

"Oh, Jim!" panted Tina, her rosy cheeks paling at the thought.

"Never fret for what is past and gone, little one," softly breathed Anderson, dropping the hand of the tramp but retaining that of the girl whom he loved as only such great hearts can worship. "I didn't mean to let it slip so soon, but we'll both laugh over it when—down brake!" checking himself once more, though he felt that none but friendly eyes were upon them. "While I'm gassing, Saul is going hungry. Tina, I owe this good friend his board just as long as he stops in town. You will remember? Not a cent can he pay over this railing. You hear, old fellow?" turning with a genial smile to the tramp.

"I would ef I could, but ef I cain't how kin I?" dolefully mumbled Solemn Saul, all light fleeing from his long face as he brought his staff forward and propped it against the railing before turning the ring and letting his miniature table fly open. "Double times over this werry same day hev I split my vow all to ge-blazes! Double times over hev I gone back onto my sacred word o'— Don't ye see, boss, sir, that I caint hitch up to your mighty kindness? Must I say it all over ag'in how I'm boun' by a spell that kin only be bu'sted by runnin' up onto a critter that ain't livin' nur never did live, nur likewise haint never goin' to come to life in this world o' sin an' sorer an'— Thar's the wormy shells an' the crooked little joker, mum!" his long fingers nimbly shifting the implements, as he added in his habitual melancholy, sing-song tones: "Dollars to cents you cain't flip over the kiver that keeps the light from smilin' onto the little joker, mum! Fer bright eyes cain't keep sart'in time with dirty fingers, an' I'm boun' to cheat ye ef I kin—I've got to, mum!"

Bewildered, unable to understand what this disreputable-looking fellow was trying to accomplish, Tina drew back with a puzzled glance into the face of her tall lover. Anderson silently nodded for her to comply, and with a dainty hand that was a little less steady than usual the maiden picked up the shell under which she felt confident the pea had just been dropped.

"I hed to do it, mum," groaned Solemn Saul, pressing a finger against the under side of the cloth and popping the black ball up from a cunningly contrived pocket which could be detected only on the most careful scrutiny in a bright light. "Hed to do it—cheatin' a lady—me! Time was—but that's gone, never to come back ag'in. Ef I wasn't so mighty low down that I couldn't git no lower—scuse me, stranger, sir, an' you, miss, mum, ef I crawl back yar in the dark fer a little bit. I wasn't al'ays so p'izen mean as this!"

"You've won your supper, Sunday," laughed Anderson, cheerily. "Go and help the boys start fair. I'll be with you shortly."

A signal told Collins to hail the tramp, and after a brief hesitation Solemn Saul accepted the invitation and a seat at their table.

"What do you think of the little lady, Saul, anyway?" asked Busby, with a slight nod backward to point his meaning.

The tramp from Texas shook his tow-head

slowly, sadly, his face as utterly woe-begone as his tones:

"Tain't her I'm thinkin' of much as o' him! 'Nother good man gone wrong! 'Nother solid head gittin' ready fer softenin'! 'Nother crazy critter pilin' up never-endin' sorer an' tribulation an' bitter 'pentance! An' all fer what? A wimmen-critter!"

"Down brake, pardner!" frowned Busby, growing earnest enough now that he thought there was just occasion. "You can't even breathe a hint against Miss Cramer where we are—mind that, will you?"

"Tain't ag'in her, but ag'inst her sex—ag'inst the gemine fender as a lump an' pa'cel an' all into a heap—that I'm kickin' as hard as sufferin' an' sorer hes left me able fer to kick," dolefully responded Solemn Saul, staring with lack-luster eyes along the apartment to where the young couple were engaged in talk, clearly forgetful for the time being that this world did not consist of themselves alone.

"Don't let the boss hear you hint even so much," nodded Busby, appeased by that half-apology. "All the heaven he thinks of these days belongs to that same gender."

"Time was when I hed much the same 'lusion," sadly muttered the man with the shells. "Time was when a plump pullet'd make me fly over the tallest fence human critter ever lifted up 'round a walk. Time was when love an' sweet breezes made up the healthiest diet I could git anyways nigh unto, but—it didn't last long! Nur it never lasts long, nuther! Time comes when the hood falls all to weenty bits from over a rooster's blinkers, an' then—then he can begin to see what a monstrous idgit the hoodoo which folks call love hes bin makin' out o' his raw material! Then he kin see that his dainty fat pullet haint nuthin' more'n a scrawny settin' hen which Daddy Nore turned out o' his scow fer fillin' everythin' else with wermin!"

"You must have been hit hard, pardner!" laughed Collins.

"Hit hard? Me? Stranger, sir, it hit me so hard that it give me the pip an' the roup an' the measles an' the cholery an' the—but what's the use?" with a melancholy sigh that seemed to lift him clear of his seat for a second. "It knocked me clean out o' the pit, an' didn't leave me feathers 'nough fer to ever bristle up to a dung-hill never ag'in no more!"

"Surely, pardner, you did have it bad!"

"Didn't I? So mighty bad that it jest kills me all over to see 'nother good man goin' wrong," was the gloomy response. "Ef you ever feel the thing come stingin' over you, pardners, don't stop to ax what it means, but break fer the bresh! Hunt a hole an' stop it up after ye, gopher-fashion! Ef ye don't, ye'll live to wish ye hed, double times over, an' that every breath ye draw by day or night! I know. I've bin thar—bin thar more'n two three couple o' times!"

As though the memory thus freshened was too great for further explanation, the Sad Man from San Saba fell to eating like one who had passed many a long day since sitting down to a regular meal.

In this he was not interrupted by the bridge hands, and they finished their meal in silence. Enough was good as a feast, and though Solemn Saul and his lugubrious sayings were quaint enough for a little at a time, the novelty soon wore off and grew stale.

The man with the shells showed no particular haste in following their example, and lingered at table even after his lantern-jaws began to show signs of fatigue, or his appetite of satiety. His brain seemed busied with the young couple at the further end of the room, lost to all memory of him or supper, and his head shook sadly as he saw this.

"It's plain 'nough fer a blind man to see with the two blinkers o' him shet tight up, so it is, now!" he mumbled to himself. "Waxination couldn't never stop sech a 'fact as them! An' they's only one cure, wuss luck fer it! Hitch an' splice an' fas'en 'em up in a double yoke! Weddin', most folks call it. I say—'nother good man gone wrong!"

The thought seemed to sting him into action, for he abruptly rose from the table, grasping his staff and thumping it sharply on the floor in time with each step, coughing and clearing his throat with persistent vigor until—the room being unoccupied save by themselves, just then—Anderson laughingly uttered:

"We hear you, Sunday!"

"Was I kickin' up sech a row, then?" innocently echoed the tramp, his little eyes opened to their widest extent as he stopped short and looked from laughing to blushing face.

"You were well served, Mr. Sunday?" hastily asked Tina, giving the muscular arm of her lover a sharp pinch under cover as punishment for his too frank betrayal of their relations.

"So mighty well that I don't feel es ef I'd ever want anythin' more in the shape o'— You don't happen to be called Bildad Barzilla Bird, I reckon, miss, mum?"

Tina shook her head, not caring to trust her voice just then.

"I knowed you wasn't, but I hed to ax—hed to!" groaned Saul.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOLEMN SAUL VISITS THE SHADES.

"WOULDN'T it be a good idea to have all that printed in plain type on a card, Sunday?" laughingly asked Anderson. "You could shove it at each person you met, and so save wear and tear on your vocal organs."

Solemn Saul drew slowly back, his little eyes filled with silent reproach as they steadily gazed into Anderson's face for a few seconds before drooping, a faint sigh quivering his thin lips, and his entire person expressing such meek, uncomplaining wretchedness that, despite his strong suspicions that this queer fellow was playing a part, Long Jim flushed with a sense of shame from his own careless speech.

"Of course, I was only joking, pardner, and—"

"You're the boy an' I'm the frog, stranger, sir," meekly muttered Solemn Saul, barely venturing a fleeting glance upward as he slowly turned toward the door. "I ain't blamin' ye fer your good-luck. I'm gittin' used to bein' pelted an' mocked an'—"

"You're not goin' off like that, Sunday," cried Anderson, one long stride carrying him within arm's-length, his grasp being firm but gentle as he checked the man with the shells. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but if I did I'm asking your pardon right now."

"Tain't wuth mentionin', pardner," and the ghost of a smile lighted up that long countenance, making it far more attractive than when draped in gloom as usual.

"Then it's wiped out? We'll see you again in the morning? Or—you haven't any place to sleep? Let me—"

"You've done a heap too much a'ready, pardner," with a slight unsteadiness in his tones as he gave that honest hand a parting grip, then drew back a pace further. "I haint clean strapped. I'll find a bunk as soon's my head is ready fer it. An' I'll come back ag'in. Even a mis'able critter like me hes to feed, an' I don't know whar I could steer up ag'inst a better table than I've found right in hyar. So, I've got to keep a-trampin', ye know, pardner."

Without waiting for an answer, Solemn Saul hastily escaped from the restaurant and shuffled down the street, all directions apparently being alike to him, for he turned the first corner he came to and then moderated his pace to a lazy saunter.

It could hardly be said that he was looking for any particular person, though his little gray eyes roved from side to side, noting each building he passed and glancing keenly over every pedestrian who came within range of their vision.

Being a comparatively "new town," Quivering Asp was not noted for the completeness or elegance of its walks, but that troubled Solemn Saul but little. With the true tramp instinct he kept to the middle of the street, his feet falling silently, his iron-shod staff giving out an echo only when its spike chanced to come in contact with a stone.

The town was not very extensive, and being a stranger therein, Solemn Saul twice found it necessary to abruptly alter his course to prevent leaving the place altogether; but this last turn led him into a busier, better lighted and more thickly built-up portion of the town.

At length the tramp came to a pause, still in the center of the street, directly in front of Pap Fouser's establishment, his attention attracted by the bright lights shining through the wide windows and open door. Through the last he could catch a glimpse of the bar, backed by a huge mirror and glittering pyramids of glass-ware. On the windows he could spell the name of the place.

"The Shades! Ef anybody was to knock off that fust crooked letter, mebbe the name'd say more ef it didn't hev any more meanin' into it! Waal, what's the odds? Whar'd I be more likely to find my man than in sech a place?"

That seemed to turn the scale, and Solemn Saul boldly crossed over to the saloon, entering quickly, taking in all there was to be seen with a single sweep of his little eyes.

That was not much. It was still early in the evening, and though the long room beyond the curtained archway was lighted up, ready for the games to open as soon as customers enough should put in an appearance, all was still therein as yet.

Pap Fouser stood behind the bar, silently polishing up a glass. His son, Burt Fouser, the hunchback, was curled up on his high stool near the big cooler, seemingly half-asleep. None others were in the room.

Solemn Saul shuffled across to the bar, quickly opening his table and placing upon it the three shells and little black ball, as he asked in a more than usually doleful whine:

"I say, mister, your name don't happen to be Bildad Barzilla Bird?"

"Not that I know of," curtly responded Pap Fouser, frowning darkly as he glanced at the thimble-rigging outfit. "Take that trash out of here, will you?"

Solemn Saul shrunk back a pace, as though anticipating a blow, but nevertheless he managed to stammer:

"I jest wanted—ef you didn't mind—"

"I never gamble, least of all on another man's pet game. Please move on, stranger," was the cold interruption.

"What is it, father?" suddenly asked the hunchback, lifting his head from his breast, and showing signs of growing curiosity as he caught sight of the little table and its odd ornaments. "What's it for? How do you play the game?"

"I didn't mean no harm, boss," meekly murmured the man from San Saba, picking up his implements as though he had not heard what Burt Fouser said. "I only wanted to ax ef you wouldn't let me throw the shells fer a drink, but—"

"Don't shut it up, stranger!" sharply cried the hunchback, in tones so harsh and croaking that Solemn Saul gave a start. "I'll play you for the drinks, just to see how the old thing works!"

Solemn Saul glanced dubiously into the dark, stern face of the elder man, and Pap Fouser grimly nodded his assent. That was his one particular weakness: he could or would deny his deformed son nothing, reasonable or unreasonable.

Burt Fouser could barely look over the counter as he stood on the floor after dropping from his high stool, but as he came around the end of the bar, Solemn Saul was given a more complete view of his person; and he actually started back with a muffled ejaculation of wonder. For the face which he now saw in no degree resembled that which he had scanned as the deformed sat on his stool dozing.

"You too!" harshly laughed the hunchback, his single eye flashing with irritable fire, but still solving the mystery by turning his head from side to side, thus contrasting his frightfully scarred with his girlishly-smooth cheek. "I'm a saint when you look at one side of my face, and a devil on the other. But that don't count. Show me how the old thing works, will you?"

Solemn Saul had not entirely recovered from that startling shock, for his long fingers trembled and were strangely clumsy as he tried to manipulate the shells and pea, mechanically mumbling:

"Try to onkiver the little joker, an' you win ef you ketch 'im. I'll cheat ye ef I kin, fer that's the way I make my bread an' butter. An' I vise ye as a fri'nd not to lay down more'n ye kin see me take up 'thout feelin' hot, fer I'm dead sure to fool ye, even ef—Waal I'll be durned!" in stupid amazement as the hunchback quickly picked up one of the shells, to reveal the pea lying beneath it.

"Is that your wonderful game?" croaked the hunchback, his unscarred half-lip curling with contempt. "If that's all there is to it, I could break a national bank at the back of it."

"I've knowed others as thunk that same way—at fu'st," with a sickly grin that died almost as soon as it was born. "But I've lost, an' I'll pay fer the best the house kin show up," he added, dropping a coin on the counter, then picking up his shells.

"Don't be in such a rush, stranger," croaked the hunchback, who was curiously inspecting the ingenious table, running his white fingers lightly over the velvet. "I'll drink with you, of course—you know my bottle, father—but I'd like to give you a chance to get even."

"Look out for burnt fingers, Burt!" grimly smiled his father as he placed glasses and decanter on the bar. "That game is old as the hills, and with a master to do the work, no man ever lived who could beat it."

"All the men living haven't tried to beat it, have they?" with a half-sulky venom in his tones as his single eye flashed up into that darkly stern countenance which softened only for him.

"You hev, an' won every clatter," interjected Solemn Saul, filling his glass as he added: "Better quit while you're ahead. I was only foolin' that time. It was my time to lose, fer the good o' the house."

"I'm not the house. And I'm open to bet your limit that I can call the turn often enough to make you think you've mistaken your calling, stranger," croaked the hunchback, for whom this new game appeared to have a peculiar fascination.

Solemn Saul set down his empty glass with a muffled groan, his little gray eyes filled with gloomy pity as they rested on that terribly marked face; the one side so smooth and fair, and even beautiful, the other so deeply scarred, so twisted and hideous, with its eyeless socket.

"Don't I know it? Hevn't I b'in thar? Didn't I say jest the same thing when I was fu'st steered up ag'inst the racket? An' didn't as trim a bunch o' fat steers melt away like a snowball in Hades when I planked 'em down fer to back my judgment?"

"Oh, give us a rest," croaked the hunchback, impatiently, pulling a handful of gold coins from his pocket and shaking them in mockery before that solemn face. "Money talks, stranger! Put up or shut up!"

Solemn Saul glanced dubiously toward Pap Fouser, who nodded assent as he coldly uttered:

"Play fair, and you're welcome to all you can win off him. If his stock runs low, remember, I'm his banker."

"And the sooner you begin, the sooner you

can continue your rambles, remember," laughed the hunchback, his one eye all aglow.

"You would hev it, pardner, keep in mind," chuckled the man with the shells, for the first time since our introduction to him showing real animation in voice and manner as he squared himself before the little stand and nimbly manipulated the shells. "I wanted to let ye off easy, but you would—keep all eyes open ef ye think to ketch—all's sot, an' afore ye show yer judgment, how much ye want to lose?"

"Put up your own figures, and father'll match 'em," curtly retorted the hunchback, never once removing his keen eye from the shell under which he felt positive the little pea rested. "I'm not to be caught by such a thin skin as that! I'm playing looker-out for my own self!"

Solemn Saul tossed his pouch on the bar, laughing softly:

"That's business, an' I'll hit ye light as a starter. I won't bet any more'n I've got. Count it, stranger, sir, an' when all's ready, give a wink, an' we'll see whar that p'izen little joker is hidin' to."

Cold, emotionless as ever, Pap Fouser emptied the little sack and matched the contents with money from his till.

"All right, boss?" asked Solemn Saul, his little eyes sparkling with animation.

"I've matched your stake, if that's what you mean."

"Then onkiver the little joker ef—Waal, now, ain't that too awful funny fer ord'nary b'lief?" lifting his hands in pretended amazement as the hunchback raised the shell he had never lost sight of.

The "little joker" was not to be seen, of course. And when Burt Fouser turned over the others, one after the other, the little black pea was revealed just where he had least expected to find it.

"Take your winnings, sir," coldly uttered Pap Fouser, pushing the twin stacks nearer the edge of the counter, but Burt croaked harshly:

"Don't be in such a rush, dad! I can beat the game, and I know it. Give me a chance to get even, stranger. I see where you fooled me the last time, but—What the devil do you mean?" he sharply cried in hot anger as Solemn Saul swiftly caught up shells and pea in one hand, snapping the table shut with his other and lifting the stout staff as one might grasp a weapon need for self-defense.

As well he might, for just then in strode Pat McCarthy at the head of his gang, stopping short with a savage curse as he recognized the tramp through whose coming he had that day suffered a most humiliating defeat.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAWYER AND HIS CLIENT.

LESLIE KELSO was in anything but a pleasant humor as he crossed the threshold of Mother's Kitchen and stepped out into the growing dusk, turning to the left as he did so, thus unconsciously adding to his unpalatable dessert; for through the lighted window he caught sight of Tina Cramer just as her little hand again touched the arm of the stalwart young bridge-boss.

He stopped short, his clinched hand involuntarily drawing back a little as though to shatter the tell-tale pane and thus open the shortest passage to the throat of the man in whom he recognized a rival, dangerous in himself, but doubly so now since he was so plainly cared for by this witching little creature. But the very madness of such an action proved its own remedy, and with a low, ugly laugh to himself, Leslie Kelso strode away, muttering:

"What the foul fiend's got into you, man? What odds if she is mashed on that double-gear'd rascal? What is she to you—and never a sight of each other until an hour ago?"

It was indeed a new experience, and little marvel that it rather bewildered as well as angered the man from New York.

This girl was so entirely different from what he had expected to see. Her native grace and beauty had so strongly impressed him from the first moment in which their eyes fairly met. And then? it promised such an easy solution to the problem over which his brain had racked itself ever since word first reached him that the long-lost individual had been run to earth at last!

Not that he was in love—he laughed shortly, harshly to himself at the ridiculous idea as he hastened on toward the little office before which swung the shingle of Selby Haslam. He was a skeptic on that subject, and always had been. No level-brained man ever "fell in love," and the silliest of all fallacies was that of "love at first sight!"

And yet—

That had seemed by far the easiest, simplest, surest path through the tangle. And he had never doubted but what he might choose it at will. Why should he? Young, polished, rich, moving in the higher circles; she a bookkeeper in a restaurant, poor, uncultured—

"It'd turn her little head too quick!" Kelso muttered, snapping off the end of a cigar as he slackened his pace to make sure he had not lost the proper direction for reaching Haslam's office. "And it would be worth something to

earn a chance or right to kick that overgrown lout out of decent company, too!"

A few minutes longer carried him to the office, and his hand was just rising to rap, for from the light shining through the one shuttered window fronting the street, he knew its owner must be within, when he heard the key snap in its wards and the barrier swung open. Under the plump hand of the stout lawyer, but Haslam stepped aside to permit the egress of the tall fellow whom Kelso had knocked down in Mother's Kitchen for insulting Tina Cramer.

Kelso was just a bit startled at the sight, and his left arm came up as a sort of guard as he uttered:

"Hallo! here we are again!"

Sam Hill hesitated just an instant, his florid face paling until the livid bruise on his cheek became painfully visible in the lamplight, but before he could do or say aught, Haslam plunged into the breach with them.

"It's all right—I've explained and smoothed matters over for us both, Kelso. Come!" and he ventured still further, catching an arm of each as he added with an exaggerated sternness: "Join hands across the bloody chasm, gentlemen, or I'll fall to and thrash you both clean out of your boots! Now then!"

Kelso knew his lawyer well enough to feel sure he would not act after this fashion without some important end to gain, but he was in a contrary mood just then and curtly retorted:

"Let the gentleman speak for himself, Haslam, can't you? If he says shake, all right; but I've given him my hand once, already!"

"I know it," quietly uttered the gambler, mechanically lifting a finger to his knuckle-marked cheek. "I'm not likely to soon forget."

"But if it was all a mistake?" persisted Haslam, scowling swiftly toward Kelso then changing abruptly to a winning smile as he faced Sam Hill, winking rapidly the while in a confidential manner. "Surely you are too sensible a fellow to hold a grudge just for that, Hill?"

"At any rate, Mr. Kelso, you can feel sure I'll never hit you from behind your back," nodded the gambler, freeing his arm from the lawyer's grasp and brushing past the young blood, rapidly striding down the street.

"I'm not so mighty sure of that, my gay gambolier!" muttered Kelso as he looked after the retreating figure, then stepping inside the office as the lawyer fell back. "You keep preciously promiscuous company, old gentleman! Have I got to mix much with such rascals?"

"It comes hard, don't it, dear boy? And we so preciously honest and frank and aboveboard and—young man, can't you ever take a hint?"

"If I can't, I wouldn't advise you to try to quicken my wits by administering the alternative, dear boy," drawled the young blood as he dropped into the chair recently vacated by Sam Hill and coolly filled the one clean glass from the bottle still standing on the little table. "Because, don't you know, dear boy, I'm enough of the mule to give kick for kick, and I have a habit of landing mine first!"

Selby Haslam made no immediate response, but stood with hands clasped behind him, his head bent and his lips tightly pursed up as he studied that dark face. Until now he had flattered himself that he knew both the face and the brain beyond it too thoroughly ever to make a mistake in reading either. But now—

"Something has happened since I left you, Mr. Kelso!" he abruptly concluded, seating himself in the chair opposite, gazing keenly, even anxiously into the dark eyes of his client as they glanced over the elevated glass. "What is it? What have you been doing? Not—surely you haven't been trying to play a lone hand at Mother's Kitchen? You couldn't be so infernally reckless as that comes to!"

"Then why are you piling up the agony so high?" coarsely retorted the young blood. "As long as you get your pay on time, what is it to you what I do or fail to do?"

Selby Haslam turned as pale as his naturally rosy skin would permit on such short notice, and his manner grew stiff and cold, his usually bland tones almost grating as he uttered:

"Are you tired of my earning those wages, Mr. Kelso? Am I to understand that you wish to shake me from this on?"

"Not a bit of it, Haslam," laughed Leslie, a little more placably. "But you're too apt to forget that you *are* in my employ, and that I am paying you to work for me, not to come the strict paternal. I'm no kid. I left off pinafores and knickerbockers fully a month ago. If I don't sport a beard, I've been as often as twice to the barber shop; and I didn't call for a stick of candy, either!"

"In still plainer terms, Mr. Kelso?"

"Drop it, old fellow, and we'll play neither of us ever said anything," briskly added Kelso, throwing off his insolent drawl and acting more like his usual self. "I've taken a fair look at your little jewel set in clay—at your paragon of a cashier—your dainty little beauty of Mother's Kitchen!"

"And what conclusion did you reach?" softly asked the lawyer, accepting the situation without demur and once more becoming his bland, suave, insinuating self.

"That you've done wonders!" with an emphatic nod. "That you've really unearthed the long-sought for—call it treasure, Haslam!"

There came a brief, troubled look into the eyes of the lawyer at this unexpected enthusiasm, but he veiled it quickly and revealed nothing of the sort in his tones as he added:

"You hired me to succeed, not to make a blunder, dear boy. I don't often fail, if I have to say it myself, and though this proved just a little bit the toughest tangle of all my professional experience, I think I can safely say I've unriddled the enigma. I think I've led you to the right person, Leslie!"

"I firmly believe you have, Haslam, but—"

"Well?" softly uttered the lawyer, as his client hesitated, a frown wrinkling his high brows. "You started to say—"

"I never counted on finding a girl of her caliber, Haslam," moodily muttered Kelso, twirling his glass on the table before him with a slightly unsteady hand.

"A daisy dipped in dew, eh?" softly laughed the lawyer, smacking his sensual lips and rubbing his fat hands together as his eyes rolled upward in affected ecstasy, real or pretended, for a few seconds; but then his manner changed abruptly and with arms folded on the little table between them, he leaned forward and spoke rapidly:

"The child is a tempting little piece, dear boy, and plenty others before you have said and thought the same thing. And others, just like you and I, Leslie, will oblige by keeping their distance!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simply that our dainty little posy is good as plucked from the parent stem by a luckier man," nodded Haslam, his tones growing just a shade harder as he noted how Kelso flinched at his announcement.

It would not suit his plans at all for any such soft nonsense! It would never do for Leslie Kelso to fall in love with this Tina Cramer. And though he had no positive information to back himself with, he did not hesitate on that account. Wasn't he a lawyer?

"Of course it really can't make the slightest difference to you or me, dear boy, since our only point is to make sure this missing person never turns up to claim what belongs to you by rights. But maybe it's just as well to say that the girl is engaged to marry a fellow known as Long Jim—eh?"

It was only a vicious oath which Kelso could not entirely smother as he recalled that big fellow—the same one whose appearance had completely blotted his own face from Tina Cramer's memory—the same fellow whom he heard her call "Jim!"

"I saw him just as I was leaving the restaurant, I reckon," he sulkily muttered in explanation. "Go on. What were you about to say?"

Haslam paused as if to collect his scattered wits, then added:

"They call him Long Jim, but his real name is Anderson, I believe. I can't say just when the ceremony is to come off, but the engagement is an acknowledged fact. It's a pity, isn't it? I fear it will break the lengthy gentleman all up when he loses her."

"Curse him!" viciously grated Kelso. "It's her I'm thinking most about. You know I've always hated the thought of mixing in any bloody work, and since I've met the girl—Haslam, before I saw that long ape come prancing in, I more than half resolved to make a sweeping change in the programme!"

"And shift the pretty cashier from desk to palace?" with a thinly disguised sneer.

"Why not?" frowning darkly. "Wouldn't that come to the same thing in the end? Wouldn't that smooth everything over?"

"It might, only for another man being a good distance ahead of you, with the wire in plain sight," quickly retorted the lawyer, growing more and more in earnest as he saw how strongly his client was interested in this young woman. "But if you are in sober earnest, it may give you some slight comfort to hear that, fearing trouble from Long Jim, I took the precaution to stir up a hornets' nest in his vicinity."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He is boss of what is called the bridge gang. Pat McCarthy is a section-boss, and hates Long Jim worse than poison. I found this out, and first making sure I could thoroughly trust the Irishman—whom I once saved from serving his State in the pen, years ago, by the way—I quietly enlisted him in my service and he has promised, for a consideration, of course, to remove the poor fellow on short notice."

Kelso started, his dark face glowing afresh as he exclaimed:

"Good enough, old fellow! And I'll bind myself to console his intended bride so thoroughly that she'll forget him in a month!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORY OF A LOST HEIRESS.

SELBY HASLAM joined in that loud laugh, but his mirth went no deeper than his lips. However much such a consummation might delight Leslie Kelso just at present, it possessed anything but a charm for him.

"It would at least be romantic," he hesitat-

ingly observed, pinching his pendulous lip with thumb and forefinger, a puzzled light coming into his eyes. "But—would it be prudent?"

"Why not?" sharply demanded Kelso, a scowl taking the place of that smile. "What real objection can you make to it, if you've covered your tracks carefully in the matter? And of course you have."

"Are you sure you have thoroughly mastered all the little details of that abominably unreasonable will, dear boy?" blandly smiled his lawyer, partly veiling his eyes with their heavy lids.

"I know all about it, don't I?"

"You should, and yet—Kelso are you really in earnest about trying to make this girl your wife?"

The young man hesitated before replying to this pointed question. Was he so sure? Was it anything more than one of the hot yet fleeting fancies which had so often overtaken him, only to be laughed at in cold contempt a few days later?

Haslam saw his chance, and quickly made the most of it.

"Because if you are not—if you can pull through life without tying such a weight around your neck—you'd best banish all such folly right now and forever!"

"Why should I? Why folly? Didn't you say yourself that she is undoubtedly the missing girl?"

"I still retain that belief, but remember that it is easier to trip up a living witness than a dead one! And don't forget that, even were you to marry and prove this girl the long lost heiress, you would have to wait until she died before gaining anything more than she chose to allow you out of the fortune. Don't forget that in case of a quarrel and a separation, you couldn't claim nor receive a dollar!"

"Are you lying, or is this truth?" sharply demanded Kelso.

"I can show you the very terms in my copy of that atrocious will, dear boy," nodded Haslam, more blandly than usual, for now he felt almost confident of gaining the point he sought to make. "Of course it is a shame and an outrage, but, all the same, it is law and gospel so far as you are concerned. And no doubt the crack-brain would have made his terms still more stringent if he could have dreamed of your ever falling across his money-bags."

Leslie Kelso sat in moody silence. This was something new to him, and it was far from pleasing. He had taken a strong fancy to this little girl, but he knew himself well enough to see that such chains would prove too galling for endurance. The mere fact of his being bound in any such manner would urge him into leaping the fence of prudence!

"Of course it isn't for me to do anything more than offer what I sincerely believe is good advice," resumed Haslam, filling his glass and daintily sipping its contents between sentences. "I know that such a tie would prove irksome to both of you. Each no doubt would mean well, but each has too spicy a temper for pulling smoothly together under such a double yoke. You know that, dear boy!"

"I know that I never even heard of such a clause before."

"I'll show it to you in the morning," with a gentle nod. "And as we have a little more time to spare, suppose I briefly run over the main points of this little case? You may have forgotten or overlooked still other points. And it is time we both saw the ground clearly."

Kelso made no response, either in assent or negation, but Haslam was not to be deterred by his sullenness.

"There were two branches to the family tree of the English Dews," he began, marking each point as made with stumpy forefinger on plump palm. "You belong to one of them, despite your different name. And, unfortunately for his son, your father was cordially hated by his brother across the water; unfortunately, I say, because that brother left an enormous fortune behind him when he sunk to rest beneath the daisies. And behind him he left a will."

"Your father had a younger sister. That sister married against his wishes, and he cast her off, vowing never to see or recognize her again. He never did, and he went to his grave still unrelenting."

"His brother across the water heard of this, and he hated your father so intensely that, before his own death, he left all his money in trust for this sister who was so bitterly hated by the man whom he so thoroughly disliked. Do I succeed in making this perfectly clear to your mind, dear boy?"

"I knew all that before," growled Kelso, sourly.

"Then we'll skip along to the next important point," smoothly resumed the lawyer, plainly resolved not to take offense. "The first husband of your aunt died shortly after their marriage, without issue. She had a hard row to hoe for a year or two, from all I have been able to learn, and at the end of that time she married again, this time to a man who was still less worthy of her, if possible. It was this last bit of news which so thoroughly angered your father that he left her barely his curse in his last will!"

"Skip that, will you?" growled Kelso, showing his teeth.

Haslam meekly bowed, and again resumed his story:

"This second husband, curiously enough, was also named Dew, though of not the slightest relationship to the English or the American branch. He was a rascally fellow, from all accounts, and it seems strange that he could woo and win such a perfect lady as your aunt; but he did, to her misfortune."

"Things went wrong with them almost from the start, from all accounts. The fellow proved to be a gambler and confidence man, if not even worse than that, though he was on his good behavior while wooing the young and charming widow. And for several years thereafter she managed to keep him tolerably straight."

"Then a streak of bad luck followed him in all he attempted, and as a matter of course he rapidly went to the bad. He took to burgling, and was believed to have engaged in an unsuccessful attempt at robbing a bank, though no positive proof could be brought against him on that count. And then, when he was set free again, after a protracted detention while the investigation was being made, he fell still lower, from all accounts, and spent more than one black night with sandbag in hand."

"What has all this got to do with the present day?" impatiently exclaimed Kelso. "That is past and gone. Skip faster or I'll leave you to drone in your own ears!"

"If you will have it that way, dear boy, so be it," bowed Haslam, still with his stereotyped smile. "Perhaps I am a little prosy, but I naturally wished to prove to you that I have had to work for my wage. Easily as I can string all this together, it was by no means a simple task to do the collecting. But to proceed:

"Digby Dew, his wife and young child, were living in a tenement-house in one of the meanest sections of New York. They were miserably poor, and more than once the wife and child were saved from literal starvation by their only less wretched neighbors. And then, one black and stormy night in midwinter, there was an awful tragedy!"

"As nearly as I could pick up the facts, and I am quite positive that I got all the essentials, Digby Dew came home drunk just before midnight, and there was a quarrel between him and his wife. The people living in the adjoining rooms heard him cursing and threatening her, but as this was no uncommon occurrence, they paid no particular attention at first. They would never have recalled the disturbance, it is likely, only for the fact that it was speedily burnt into their memory. In other words the alarm of fire broke forth, and all saw that it started in the two rooms occupied by the Dew family."

"Some one broke down their door, and dragged the woman down-stairs, with her child following at first, but the fire spread so rapidly that the kindly neighbor, who had enough to do to save himself and the limp, silent woman, lost the child at the next landing."

"When the outer air was reached, the rickety shell was all ablaze, but the gallant fellow never gave that a thought at first. For he saw that he had rescued—not only a living woman but a corpse!"

"Her skull was beaten in, and she was already growing cold!"

"Skip all that, curse you!" shivered Kelso, pouring the last glass of liquor from the bottle and hastily gulping it down. "Don't you know how I hate such bloody yarns? Are you bent on breaking me all up?"

"I'll be as brief as possible, but I must bring out all the main points, you know," apologized the lawyer. "There was an inquest, of course, and as there were several witnesses to testify to the recent quarrel between husband and wife, and as Digby Dew had disappeared beyond finding, and as no lives had been lost by burning, there could be but one verdict. Murder. And Digby Dew, the guilty man!"

"Although no lives were lost in the fire, a number were more or less seriously injured, some by burns, others by falling down stairs. One of the last, I believe, was the only surviving member of the family, counting Digby Dew as dead, in fact as he was in law. I mean the little daughter, named Alberta."

"And you think this Tina Cramer is that same child?" eagerly asked Kelso, though he knew in advance what the lawyer's answer would be.

"I think so. I may even say I am positive she is none other than the little girl who was taken to the hospital after that fire."

"And the Cramers took charge of her when she left the hospital?"

For the first time since beginning his narration, Selby Haslam visibly hesitated before answering. A shade crept over his face, and it did not vanish until one of those plump hands passed repeatedly from temples to chin.

He saw that Kelso noticed his uneasiness, and he dared not attempt to cover it with a lie. He had gone too far not to make open confession, and thus expose the one weak spot in his long chain of evidence.

"That was the place that stuck me for so

many weeks," he admitted with seeming candor. "For a long time I began to doubt ever getting at the whole truth, but a most fortunate chance aided me."

"Not one of your own providing, I trust?" sneered Leslie.

"You shall judge for yourself, dear boy," once more his old suave self. "I found that the child was taken to the hospital, and that it was in a fair way of recovery; indeed, the authorities were almost on the point of turning it out to shift for itself, when the child disappeared! Vanished as completely and suddenly as though it had dissolved into thin air!"

"You never told me aught of this!" frowned Kelso, his suspicions growing stronger with each fresh admission. "Why did you lie to me?"

"I simply evaded your questions, dear boy," purringly murmured the lawyer, with a deprecatory wave of his plump white hands. "Why should I harrow your brain with empty doubts, when I felt confident I had a clew which, by tracing it up, could satisfy us both ere long? I had the clew. I did trace it up. And now I can frankly say to you that I know just how and why that child disappeared from the hospital so strangely."

"There was a family—burnt out of house and home on that awful night, by the way—in which little Alberta Dew was a prime favorite. They were poor enough, but one of the matrimonial firm was enterprising as well, and shaped a plan by which their situation might be bettered. To do this they must leave the metropolis and seek another home. And this came all the easier because their only child, also a daughter, and of about the same age as Alberta Dew, had recently died from a cold contracted the night they were burnt out."

"Do you begin to see light?" with a low laugh. "Is it so hard to fill out the scant blank left in the record? If so—listen!"

"This family were ignorant of the law. They loved Alberta Dew, and longed to take her with them to fill the place left vacant by death. They believed Digby Dew was still alive, and feared he would claim his own were they to openly adopt the child. And so they watched their chance and stole away the little patient from the hospital, leaving town in a day or two afterward."

"And that family?"

"Were named Josh and Sally Cramer!" blandly smiled Haslam.

CHAPTER XVII.

DISCUSSING WAYS AND MEANS.

As he pronounced those names, Selby Haslam leaned back in his chair with a graceful motion of his white hand, smiling even more blandly than ordinary as he waited for remark or comment from his client. Everything about his looks and actions expressed perfect content and entire satisfaction. If he was conscious of a single flaw or imperfect link in his side of the case as presented, he was far too cool and wary an old fox to permit its betrayal by word or action.

Leslie Kelso was still toying nervously with his empty glass, his face dark and troubled. He began to realize the difference between talking and acting. It was no difficult matter to declare that such and such a person must be removed, if death had to be summoned as an ally. It was quite another thing to have that person standing before you, with the knife in your own hand, and the prize to be won only by an actual use of the weapon.

Selby Haslam saw something of this in the darkened countenance of his client as he sat in placid waiting for comments on his story, but he never betrayed the fact by change in face or voice. He was beginning to feel a most profound contempt for his employer, and to feel that his sole redeeming quality was his wealth.

"And that family consisted of Josh and Sally Cramer, dear boy," he repeated, as a gentle reminder that his recital had reached a legitimate ending.

Leslie Kelso gave a start, lifting his dark eyes to that smiling mask, much as though he had forgotten its vicinity.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" he sulkily demanded.

"Surely, dear boy, that is for you to decide," with a faint echo of surprise in his tones. "You are the master, and I am simply an humble tool in your employ. You command, and I obey. Consequently I beg permission to echo your query: what are we going to do about it?"

There was no immediate response. Leslie Kelso was trying vainly to recall the exact terms of that abominably unjust will.

In a general way he was familiar enough with its conditions. He knew that a vast fortune had been left in trust for Theodosia Dew, disowned sister to the brother whom the testator so thoroughly and unrelentingly hated. If she was dead, the property was to fall to her offspring, if any, on certain conditions. If dead, and no living issue, or if living and not to be found within a specified number of years from the date of testator's demise, said property was to revert to sundry benevolent institutions, duly named and enumerated.

Try as he might he failed to recall any such proviso as that mentioned by Selby Haslam, though he knew, in a general way, that the dead man had taken all possible precautions to hinder his detested brother from sharing in the fortune, even after the most remote fashion.

"You haven't a copy of that cursed will by you just now, Haslam?"

"Not this moment. I will show it to you in the morning if that will serve your purpose, dear boy."

"Never mind. I don't believe you'd dare tell me a flat-footed lie which could be so easily detected," bluntly uttered the young man. "Say you are right in that respect: how are we going to manage? What plans have you formed? Out with it, man!"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders slightly before replying:

"It is for you to make the final decision, my dear fellow. I am simply your agent in this, as in all that has gone before. You refused to listen to the advice I gave you at the start; you declined to permit me to manufacture a defunct heiress to fit the situation, because you wished to learn for certain just what had become of the lost family."

"To guard against any of them turning up just when least wanted, of course," growled Kelso.

"So you said at the time, and I meekly bowed to your wishes," nodded the lawyer, placidly. "It was your affair, not mine. I had but to follow the line shadowed out by you, and my bounds have not altered an atom since then. Such being the case, I repeat: what are we going to do about it?"

"Drop the hypocrite and play open, confound you!" burst out the young man, showing his teeth as his thin lips curled back. "I ruffled you up a bit ago, and you've not forgotten it. You're playing to even up, but you may go just one inch too far, and then—"

Leslie Kelso left his sentence incomplete so far as cold type can represent it, but Selby Haslam found no difficulty in filling up the hiatus. That danger-signal in those black eyes was only too readily interpreted, and as an open quarrel was the last thing he wished for just then, he cast aside all further pretense, and briskly uttered:

"So be it, Kelso! After all, you and I stand on pretty equal footing in this little game, and so—man to man it shall be from this hour on!"

"That's more like it," with a short nod. "I never see you with that infernal smirk on your fat face but what I'm tempted to try if a lusty kick would break it up even a little bit!"

The lawyer laughed lightly at this, but took no offense.

"Don't abuse my smile, Kelso, whatever else you do. It's the most valuable part of my professional belongings. It has brought me in more good hard money than all the rest of—but let that drop," as his fellow-schemer made an impatient gesture.

"You ask what is the next move in our little game for a big stake. Well, that depends mainly on yourself, as I hinted a bit ago. If you have changed your mind since I left you to follow up my clew; if you are firmly set against what we then agreed upon in case there should prove to be a real, live heiress—"

"Are you willing to kill her, as you seem to want me to do?" Leslie Kelso sharply interposed.

"Did I say I wished or expected you to hold the weapon in your own hand?" was the swift retort. "Yet when I first told you I had good reasons for believing there was a living child who had called Theodosia Dew mother, you swore you'd give ten years of your life just to feel your fingers closing about its throat!"

"Do you always pick your words so carefully no flaw can be found in any of them?" frowned the young man. "Let the past be past. Come down to the present, or let me get out of this. I reckon I can stagger through the game without your valuable services, if I have to!"

For a brief space Selby Haslam felt strongly tempted to take him at his word, and forever cast off the yoke he found so galling. Large as were his wages, and prompt their payment, those figures alone could never have held him bound and meek under such unreasonable provocation.

"Think twice before you kick me out, Kelso," he said, his voice cold and even menacing, in startling contrast to the manner of treatment which his client had grown accustomed to from him. "If you try to play the rest of the game alone, maybe you'll find a stronger hand out against you than you have any idea of just now!"

"Yours, do you mean?" flashed the hot-tempered young fellow.

"A man must live, and I've done double work for my wages, remember, dear boy," with a perfect resumption of his ordinary suavity. "I naturally expect to make it up when the victory is won, and I'm just conceited enough to believe that I alone can win it—for or against you, dear boy, just as you may elect!"

"Of course I don't want to kick you out," a

little sulkily. "But I'll take no part in bloody work. Mark that much down in big letters, Haslam, and consider it sworn to!"

"Then you are still thinking of winning the heiress? You believe you can content yourself with what the little angel is ready to allow you as pocket money?"

"Not if I can put my hands on the whole amount, be sure!"

"Less my commission, of course," with a low laugh, then adding in brisk, business-like tones: "All right. You want me to say what we are to try next. I'll give you my ideas, and you can improve on them if you can do so."

"First, we'll grant that this little jewel set in clay—your own fancy, dear boy, and quite neat, too! We'll admit that Tina Cramer is the only surviving child of the late Theodosia Dew, and therefore the sole heiress to a fortune big enough for half a dozen! We'll admit that her claims might easily be established, if she only knew of her rights. But—shall she ever appear as a claimant?"

"Not if it can be prevented without—"

"I comprehend," nodded the lawyer, as his client hesitated to put his meaning into plain words. "I'm no more anxious to actually soil my hands after that fashion than you are, dear boy; but, as I had the honor to suggest to our mutual friend with the red hair and liquorish tooth only a little while before you came back, there are more ways of killing a cat than by choking her with cream."

"You mean that rascal I knocked end-ways?"

Selby Haslam nodded assent.

"Samuel Hill, gambler and sport in general. Do you know, dear boy, I really fancy he dislikes you, just a little bit?"

"He's got cheek enough to account for it, anyway," grimly laughed Kelso as he recalled that ugly bruise revealed by the lamplight.

"You builded better than you knew when you laid him out, Kelso, though it made me a bit hot at the time. I had his part cut out for him in advance, but I believe I can use him to still better advantage after this little fracas."

"Don't you put too much trust in the rascal. He'd give a hand to get me foul, and you'd ought to know it, too!"

"If he gets a rope instead, and even then fails to grip you foul?" chuckled Haslam, rubbing his fat palms briskly together. "If we can use his claws to rake the chestnuts out of the fire? And do it, too, without his so much as suspecting our little game?"

"Can that be done?"

"I think so, and I'll tell you why. I brought the fellow here, to make the best of a bad matter. I soon found out that what I took for bad, was really the best. And then—let me tell you!"

"I made him believe you and Tina Cramer were old acquaintances. I swore that in days gone by you and she were lovers, with the wedding-day set and I explained how a little love spat ended in complete separation. How you enlisted me in the search, and how I discovered the dear little spit-fire and at once summoned you to the spot."

"But if he mentions that to her, she'll deny it all!"

"Is he likely to seek an interview with the girl he so shamefully insulted before a crowd? If he should make the attempt, think you Tina Cramer would listen to a single word from his lips? Not a bit of it, dear boy, and I'm all the more firmly convinced of this from the manner in which he snapped at the bait I carelessly dropped before him."

"What bait do you mean?"

"A chance to more than get even with you, of course," was the instant response. "I told him a certain rich lady was dead mashed on you, and that she would pay almost any sum to keep you from renewing that old engagement with Tina. I told him I dared not play you false myself, but that I knew how to wink when anything was happening which it would be best for me not to see too plainly."

"To put it still plainer, I hinted that he might not only be revenged on you, but put a snug sum into his own pocket and gain a delicious little wife by running away with Tina Cramer; willingly if he chose to try coaxing her, by force if he was the shrewd man I believed."

"Then you're a bigger fool than I ever took you for!" flashed Kelso, his fist thumping the table viciously.

"Am I, really?" innocently drawled the lawyer, his brows arching.

"Yes, you are! You've given the rascal who hates me worse than poison a chance to knock me clean out of the ring, supposing he follows your infernal advice! Why—if he should run her off, wouldn't he be dead sure to nose out the real reason why you wanted to get rid of her? Wouldn't he see there was something rotten underneath it all, the moment we laid claim to the money?"

Selby Haslam laughed softly, his eyes half closing as he leaned back in his chair, placidly uttering:

"If he should live long enough, perhaps he might, but will he?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAP FOUSER'S MUSICAL MYSTERY.

LESLIE KELSO stared into that smiling countenance, failing to comprehend the full import of that drawing sentence.

"You fail to catch on, dear boy?" more briskly added Haslam, once more supporting his elbows on the table, marking each point with forefinger on fat palm. "I looked deeper than you, for I saw death written on the face of the gentle Samuel. I saw him fleeing from Quivering Asp with a fair and helpless maiden in his arms. I saw the row which broke out in town when the abduction was discovered. I saw pursuit made. I saw a body—dead or quick, I am not quite positive—being run up a tree, and as it revolved with the tightening of the rope, I saw the bruised cheek of our unfortunate friend, Samuel Hill!"

"It's too risky, I tell you!" doggedly frowned Kelso.

"And I say no, with a far better opportunity of judging than you possess, dear boy," was the placid retort. "Don't forget that I have almost as much at stake in this little game as you, Kelso. Nor am I one whit more anxious to risk either reputation or neck in winning."

"I'll egg Sam Hill into running off the girl. I'll find means to give him an ally whom I can command, body and soul. I'll have this tool of mine kill the girl, and fix the crime on Sam Hill so certainly that he'll be strung up to the nearest tree so quick it'll make his head swim!"

"But if he should tell what he knows? If he should have time enough to point you out as the one who set him up to the job?"

"Never you borrow trouble on that score," with a light laugh. "I can and will guard fully against even the ghost of danger to either you or me. I only wish I could be as certain of yourself!"

There was no immediate response to this insinuation. Kelso bowed his face in his clasped hands as though in deep thought. Selby Haslam frowned darkly as he noted this, but he coldly waited for the result.

Kelso finally raised his head, showing a troubled countenance.

"It's a worse job than I had any idea of, Haslam!" he muttered.

"Yet we have talked it over often enough!"

"At a distance—before I had met this poor child! That was different. I could see only the dollars then. Now—"

"You are tempted to throw up your chance of fingering those dollars, all for a pretty face?" sneered the lawyer, his eyes glowing with an angry, evil light.

"I'm not sure but what I'd be the gainer, even then," with a forced laugh as he tossed back his head and picked up the bottle, to find it empty. "Let it drop for to-night, Haslam. I won't decide all in a minute. Don't crowd it onto me, for if you do—well, I might treat you as I served Sam Hill, and run to charming Tina for consolation!"

Haslam was shrewd enough to see that he must content himself with this much, for he saw that, despite the exaggerated threat, Leslie Kelso was more than half in earnest.

"All right, dear boy. We'll sleep on it, and tackle the matter with cool brains in the morning. And so—shall we take a walk? Though a little less gigantic, perhaps, than those you are accustomed to see at home, Quivering Asp can boast its elephants, and Pap Fouser has one in which even you might take an interest."

Leslie Kelso gave a slight start at that name, and something of curiosity leaped into his eyes as he asked:

"Who is Pap Fouser? What connection has he with the game we are playing? You hinted at something of the sort when we were in his place this evening. What did you mean?"

The shadow of a frown flitted across the lawyer's face, though he strove to conceal the fact by using his hand to brush an imaginary mote from his eyes. Kelso saw this, and his face grew cold and stern as he sharply added:

"You're trying to hide something from me, old man. What is it? How can this Pap Fouser be mixed up in our affairs? Out with it—and never mind trying to tell me a lie."

"I'll not lie to you, Kelso," Haslam said slowly. "I don't say I wouldn't if I could gain anything important by so doing. We're past the stage of wearing masks for each other, you know!" with a short and hard laugh.

"We'd ought to be, but you're such a preciously slippery rascal I'd hate to go bail for you. Out with it; the quicker you talk the less time you'll have for building up a cock-and-bull story."

Blunt words, but Haslam saw that the speaker was badly out of sorts just then, and did not care to run the risk of a still more open rupture by resenting the insult—if insult it could be called, when its sole fault was containing too much truth.

"If I hesitated, it was because I really don't know just what to say," he responded, with a real or affected candor. "I have only suspicion to go upon, and that of the slightest nature. Still, I believe that this Pap Fouser is connected after a fashion with Tina Cramer."

Kelso fairly started from his seat, his sallow

face turning as pale as nature would permit, his dark eyes distending and full of wild excitement if not actual alarm.

"What—what do you mean?" he hoarsely demanded, his hands clinching tightly. "Not—he surely can't be Digby Dew?"

Selby Haslam also started, in turn, and his face altered amazingly; but it was with pure amazement, not fear.

"What under the sun put that idea into your head, Kelso?" he ejaculated, breaking into a hearty laugh as he sunk back into his seat, to add: "Digby Dew? Pap Fouser? Nonsense, man!" again leaning forward, his elbows on the table. "Would he be living here so quietly, with the girl only a few squares away, and her face the perfect image of her mother?"

"Then how can they be connected, if it isn't that way?" muttered Kelso, brushing his damp brows with a still trembling hand. "Confound you, man! you gave me suco a start."

"Ditto me ditto," laughed the lawyer lightly, then adding: "Whatever the connection may prove, rest assured it is not that of father and daughter, dear boy. The very idea is too ridiculous to be worth a second thought. I studied Digby's picture too carefully for such a blunder as that, and I marvel that you didn't notice as much. Pap Fouser is tall beyond the ordinary, while Dew was short and stout. Don't you remember?"

Kelso nodded assent, drawing the first free, full breath since that preposterous idea flashed across his brain.

"I remember, now that you mention the picture. But I didn't particularly notice Pap Fouser, as you call him, and when you spoke of his being connected—what do you mean, anyway?"

"Bridle your tongue a bit, dear boy, and I'll tell you just as much as I know for myself. That isn't nearly as much as I would like, nor the half of what I count on knowing before the cock crows for ghosts to begin their weekly perambulations."

"You saw and heard enough while in The Shades to know that Pap Fouser is a little out of the ordinary class of saloon and gambling-house proprietors. You know his motto, and you heard his prescription. And if you are content to take a little stroll under my guidance this night, maybe you'll see and hear something still more remarkable."

"Come to the point, man!" frowned Kelso.

"What about his connection with Tina Cramer?"

"Did you notice her voice while in Mother's Kitchen?"

"I heard her speak, of course. What has that to do with it?"

"Then you must have noticed how clear and distinct, yet soft and musical it was. Now then—I've heard that very same voice while at the faro-tables in Pap Fouser's place!"

"Not—are you crazy, man?"

"I asked myself that same question when I caught the sweet echoes of that voice, in such a strange place," laughed Haslam.

"Not dealing faro?" incredulously cried the young man.

"Wait a bit, dear boy, and let me get to the point after my own peculiar fashion," placidly uttered the lawyer, plainly enjoying the fever into which his words has cast his client. "Let me say that no man outside of Pap and Burt Fouser has ever caught sight of a feminine figure in or about The Shades. And yet—as sure as Saturday night comes around, and on odd occasions through the weeks, I've been told, although it has never come under my personal notice—a woman certainly is in The Shades, to be heard if not seen!"

"For the last time, what do you mean?"

"That Pap Fouser is a devout believer in judicious advertising. That Pap Fouser knows how to draw and retain custom, better than any other man in his line that I ever had the pleasure of meeting. If you come with me this evening, I'll go bail you'll say the same thing!"

"How does he do it? By calling into play a most charming mystery! By stopping the gambling at a certain hour and then—the gates of paradise open, to drop a celestial singer down behind a curtained door at the further end of the gaming room! And if you are lucky enough to keep your senses while that musical mystery is performing, I'm open to wager long odds that you will—as I did, the third time I heard it—be ready to take oath you have heard that voice before; that the hidden singer can be none other than Tina Cramer!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A PUPIL TAKEN UNDER PROTEST.

THE burly section-boss stopped short, barely inside the door, an ugly look of recognition flashing into his bruised and discolored face as his gaze fell upon the half-defiant, half-shrinking thimble-rigger.

"Will ye luk at the loikes av that, now, b'yes?" he cried in real or admirably affected indignation. "The impudence av the devil himself is howly bashfulness be the soide av that dirty scut! Av the place wor moine, now, it's loike this I'd be afther foirin' the scuff out of the way o' offindin' the sinse o' smill o' gintlemin, so I w'u'd, now!"

As the last words crossed his lips, Pat McCarthy made a sudden move forward, plainly intending to assault the man with the shells, but he stopped just as quickly, and for a very good reason.

Burt Fouser stepped in front of Solemn Saul and covered the burly tough with a derringer, croaking harshly:

"Keep your clothes on, won't you? This gentleman is a friend of mine, and you can't bounce him worth a cent!"

"Ye little devil ye!" gasped the section-boss, instinctively lifting his muscular left arm as though to catch the expected bullet in it, as safer than to stop it with his thick skull.

"You'll think I'm a mountain on ten wheels if I have to go for you, Pat," harshly laughed the hunchback, his scarred half-face twitching and growing even more frightfully distorted than usual. "I don't want to waste a cartridge, but if I have to—you'll never live to carry the news to Mary!"

"Av ye was a man, or anything loike a man, I'd—"

"I'm a man, Mr. McCarthy," coldly interposed Pap Fouser, leaning lightly on the bar, his dark eyes steadily gazing into the flushed face of the section-boss, but making no movement toward arming himself. "Can I serve you in any way, this evening?"

There was greater danger hidden beneath this cold address than in all the harsh bluster of the hunchback, and Pat McCarthy was not slow to recognize the fact. It was hard to "take water," but this interposition made it a little more easy for him to do so.

"I didn't notice ye at first, Mr. Fouser," he said, his brogue almost entirely vanishing, as it had a trick of doing whenever he was entirely cool, or holding his unruly passions in check. "All I saw was that tramping impostor who made me lose two of my best men the day."

"Sufferin' grandpap o' lyin' an' slanderation!" exploded Solemn Saul, thumping his iron-shod staff almost fiercely on the sanded floor.

"Will ye deny that ye thried to cheat my min wid that bit av a sthick in the fist o' ye?" fiercely demanded McCarthy, his hot temper again bursting bonds. "Will ye deny that—Boss!" turning toward the coldly watchful proprietor, and giving his tones a touch of coaxing as he added: "Give me leave to shake the truth out of that thief? If I don't convince ye that every word I'm speaking is Holy Gospel, I'll pay the damages at your own figures! Indade I will, now!"

"I don't permit quarreling inside these four walls, Mr. McCarthy. If you can persuade the gentleman to step outside with you, all right."

"Will ye be afther comin', ye thrampin' 'poshtur?" grated the section-boss, stepping forward as though he would grasp the man with the shells, only to utter a muffled howl of angry pain as the polished staff flashed through the lamplight to knock his hand down, bruised and stinging in every nerve.

His gang broke into disorder as they pressed forward to aid their boss, but once more Burt Fouser stood before the sad-faced man, for whom he had taken such an odd fancy, his tones more than ever like the croaking of a raven.

"You can't take one side o' him out of here, you hulking brute!"

The muzzle of his wide-bored derringer actually touched the face of the section-boss, and McCarthy shrunk hastily back until checked by running against two of his own men.

"Will we clean out the shebang, boss?" one of them asked.

Just then two men entered the saloon, and brushing past the gang, stood between them and the counter, seemingly surprised to find themselves in the midst of what promised to be an ugly fracas.

"Hello, Mr. Fouser! Hope we're not intruding."

As he spoke he waved a plump hand toward the section-boss and his gang, though it did not seem to be an order, or even signal. Yet such it was, and Pat McCarthy did not see fit to disregard it, either.

"I'll be on the wait fer ye outside, ye dandy bucko!" he grated, with an angry glower toward Solemn Saul, at the same time thrusting his men aside, to beat a swaggering retreat through the doorway.

"And I'll come with him to see fair play, Patsy," taunted Burt.

Solemn Saul said nothing in addition, for his whole attention was directed toward the stout lawyer, toward whom he was silently shifting, with something in his movements which suggested a cat preparing to leap upon an unsuspecting bird or mouse. That was what occurred to Pap Fouser, whose cold but watchful eyes took in everything about him, and he was just on the point of speaking to the fellow when Selby Haslam started under a touch, and turned to hear:

"Your name hain't Bildad Barzilla Bird, I reckon, boss?"

"Not unless I was changed at the christening font, my good man," blandly responded the lawyer, yet with a keen, close scrutiny of that

long, lugubrious face. "Are you out gunning for that sort of bird?"

"I knowed it. I knowed it'd be jest that way," dejectedly muttered the Sad Man from San Saba, mournfully wagging his tow-head as he meekly retreated a pace or two. "Beg pardon fer 'trudin', boss, but I *hed* to do it—I jest *did*—wuss luck me!"

"Never mention it, sir," bowed Haslam, as suavely as he might to a magnate. "I wish I might lay claim to the name for your sake, but I'm religiously opposed to lying. Fouser, isn't the evening to be celebrated after the orthodox fashion? Aren't we to have an opportunity of getting rid of our loose change? And—rich reward!" with an uprolling of his eyes in an expression meant to convey ecstatic appreciation, "are we not to be blessed with another celestial solo?"

"It's early yet," coldly responded the proprietor, his dark face showing neither pleasure nor disapproval as he added: "It is probable there will be a song or two. I would not like to say for certain."

"Then we'll be on hand, later," briskly nodded Haslam, as he spun a coin on the polished counter. "One glass to lend us patience!"

They drank, then left the saloon, just as a number of others entered the place and ranged themselves along the bar.

Solemn Saul seemed about to approach them with his futile query, but the hunchback impatiently caught his arm and pulled him toward the curtained arch beyond which lay the long, wide apartment devoted to the goddess of fortune.

"They're only rounders, and never a man among them with a name anything like that swarm of bees! Who is he, and what are you hunting him for?"

Solemn Saul heaved a mighty sigh as his head wagged dolefully.

"He ain't nobody. He ain't nuthin'. They ain't never no sech critter as him, an' I wish I was dead—billy-be-durned ef I don't, now!"

The hunchback stopped short, his grip facing Solemn Saul so that the glow of a chandelier fell fairly across his thin features. That single eye glittered and snapped, keenly scrutinizing that melancholy visage as though resolved to read all that lay beneath the surface.

"What sort of racket are you giving me, stranger?" harshly croaked the deformed, a puzzled look creeping over the unscarred portion of his face. "You're not half the fool you claim to be. You're a keener, you are, or all signs lie. Yet—I like you. Maybe it's your new game, though!" with a cackling laugh that grated disagreeably on the nerves.

"I ain't nothin' an' I'm wuss then nobody, boss," meekly muttered the tramp from Texas, heaving a sigh that came from the lower regions. "Time was—but it ain't that way no longer!"

"What's the odds, anyway?" laughed the hunchback, fingering the bright band which held the table closed. "Brace up and make believe you're somebody, and you'll never know the difference. If it's thinking of Pat McCarthy, never let that thought trouble you again. I'll go bail he'll never bother you as long as you're under this roof-tree, and—"

He stopped short, gazing keenly into that lank face for a few moments, his own cheek flushing a little as he impulsively added:

"Why not? Look here, partner; name your figures, board and lodging thrown in, and I'll engage you myself! I've taken a fancy to you, as I said before, but I've taken a greater fancy to your little snap. Name your figures, and say that you'll teach me all about the little joker!"

It was a curious proposition, and Solemn Saul plainly showed that he so regarded it. He stood staring with wondering eyes, his lower jaw dropping until his tobacco-stained teeth were visible. Only for a few seconds, however, then he showed more energy in voice and manner than at any time since entering the saloon.

"Don't ye do it! Don't ye even think it, boss!" and something like a shiver of dread shook his lank figure. "Ef the temptation is stealin' onto ye, choke it down quicker'n ye'd git out o' the reach of a rattler at sheddin' time. Look at me! Time was—"

"Bite it off, partner," nodded young Fouser, with his harsh laugh. "I'm not thinking of setting up an opposition game. All I want is to see through the trick, purely for amusement. I haven't any too much," with a sudden lowering of his voice as a finger rose to his hideously scarred face, then twisted back to tap his deformed shoulders. "I'm carrying a heavier load than you claim, and mine is bitterly genuine!"

This was a new side to his character, and Solemn Saul was plainly affected by the bitter sadness which underlay those words. Yet he still hesitated, as though fearful for the result, should he gratify the sudden fancy of the deformed.

"I hate to 'fuse ye, stranger, sir," he muttered, shifting uneasily beneath that brilliant orb. "Ef I didn't know so monstrous well what a never-dyin' cuss this sort o' gamblin' hes proved to my own self!"

"It is only a whim, but I'm willing to pay a good price for having that fancy gratified," ob-

stinately persisted Burt Fouser. "I don't say how long that fancy will last, but while it does I'll pay you big, and see that you are treated like a lord."

"Ef it wasn't sech a p'izen cuss!" groaned Solemn Saul.

"It will never prove a curse to me," impatiently interposed the hunchback. "I have been raised alongside a gambling-table. There isn't a gambling device that has the slightest attraction for me, once I have learned all the ins and outs of it. Just so it will be with this one; but I'll be as near happy while its novelty lasts as such a monstrosity can ever hope to feel! If not for money, stranger, then yield for the sake of humanity!"

There was no acting in this. There was feverish sincerity in that face, that eye, that harsh voice. And Solemn Saul could hold out no longer against such pleading, though it was with a doleful sigh that he planted his staff in the corner, where they would be hidden from view of any one in the saloon.

With a strange eagerness the hunchback watched every move, his one eye glowing brightly, his smooth cheek flushed hotly. And when he at first picked up the shell which covered the little joker, not once but several times in succession, his laugh broke out merrily, almost boyishly; and so different was this from his usual demeanor, that Pap Fouser stole a covert glance around the edge of the curtain, his dark eyes strangely softened, his hard face twitching curiously.

He never even thought of looking to see how heavily his son was losing, or even if any betting was going on. He valued his gold only as it might bring pleasure or forgetfulness to his child. Burt might waste in a night the profits of a year, and Pap Fouser would only nod his approval. If Burt was content, surely *he* should be!

Solemn Saul saw nothing of this, and was in ignorance of the fact that he had won for a friend the hardest man in all Quivering Asp to get acquainted with. And with Pat McCarthy and his evil gang playing to get even with him, the time might easily come when he would need backers.

CHAPTER XX.

AN EVENING IN THE SHADES.

BEFORE long the usual crowd began to pour into the gambling hall, where already two tables devoted to faro were supplied with dealers and their "looker-out." In addition to these conveniences for visitors to get rid of their superfluous wealth, there was a smaller table devoted to Spanish monte, with a native in the chair, rigged out in all the glory of his sunny clime.

Only these three tables were in the room, though Pap Fouser provided smaller apartments in the second story for such as preferred to spend their time and money over short-card games. In these he was interested simply to the amount charged for rent.

He never touched a card in play himself, any more than he ever permitted liquor to pass his lips.

The hunchback sometimes played faro or monte, simply to kill the time which hung so heavily on his hands, despite the care and scheming of Pap Fouser to provide something interesting for him.

But on this night Burt had eyes and thoughts only for the magical shells and the nimble little joker. More than once he rudely bluffed away curious visitors who, charmed by the prospect of something out of the usual run, paused before the melancholy thimble-rigger, more than one offering to bet odds that they could turn up the little ball.

"This is my private snap, gentlemen," the hunchback would croak, his single eye adding to the warning his lips conveyed. "Some day I may let you in, but not this evening. Oblige me by moving on, please!"

There was never a serious objection offered, for every citizen of Quivering Asp who had a sporting tendency, was fully aware that the lightest fancy of the hunchback was law in The Shades. And that concluding word sounded so much like the convincing termination to Pap Fouser's famous prescription!

By degrees Solemn Saul began to wax less doleful, and his long fingers flew so nimbly that the deformed rarely found the right shell, and even then was forced to admit that he had simply guessed at it.

"But that isn't the way you make your money, old fellow, he added, giving a signal which was promptly answered by the man who came to assist in tending bar. "Wet your lips, and then get down to business. I want to see the entire menagerie, claws and all!"

"It hain't so terrible bad ef ye do it all in fun, but ef you ever slam a hull herd o' fat steers onto the table as I did!" sighed the man from San Saba, once more setting his fingers to flying swiftly.

He went over every trick of the thimble-rigger in turn, first bewildering the deformed, then showing him how his eyes had been deceived; now dropping the little pea from under his curved fingernail, then shaking it out of the

very shell which Burt had impatiently cast down as another failure. He popped the little joker up from cunningly hidden pockets in the cloth itself, or else showed a substitute which he adroitly slipped under another shell while lifting it to show where the pea had really been deposited. In a word, all the tricks of the trade, until Burt was fairly beside himself with delight at the never-ending variety of cheating possibilities.

"There's a mint in it, man alive?" he cried, as he signaled for a fresh supply of liquor. "You'd ought to make your independent fortune at the game inside of a single year! There no end of suckers waiting to be caught; and I never run up against a more skillful fisherman than you have proved yourself this night!"

Solemn Saul drew a lugubrious groan from his inner depths, wagging his tow-covered pate in sad dissent.

"Didn't I think jest that way when I was fu'st steered up ag'in't the durned swindle? Didn't I go my hull len'th, an' funder, onto it? I did, pardner, an' whar'd I come out?"

"But you were on the wrong side of the table, then," laughed Burt, just touching his lips to his glass, then casting its contents on the floor, for he was not given to hard drink. "Why, only for Pat McCarthy coming in just as he did, you might have broken The Shades all to pieces right off the reel, I was so dead sure I could beat the game!"

The tramp from Texas sighed still more profoundly.

"Tain't wealth nur filthy lucre I'm lookin' fer, boss, or it mought pan out pritty nigh as you say, fer I've got the lesson clean by heart. Ef they wasn't sech a bitter black cuss hangin' all over me—but that ain't airnin' the wages you're goin' to give me!" and he once more began to perform marvels with the shells and little joker.

Selby Haslam and Leslie Kelso returned to The Shades, and after a drink and little chat with the grave proprietor, who still stood behind his bar, though his assistants had arrived, they strolled into the room devoted to gaming.

Though the lawyer had not long resided in Quivering Asp, he appeared to know everybody, and introduced his younger companion to far more gentlemen than the latter could or cared to remember.

They paused for a short time at each of the faro tables, placing several small bets, "for the good of the house," as Haslam blandly observed, rather than with any serious expectation of making a winning worth the time and trouble, but when they reached the table where the Mexican was dealing his national game, Celso grew interested, as he had never before "run up against" the game as there played.

It possessed the double merit of being simple and easy to comprehend, while being quick and lively enough for the most inveterate gambler.

After watching the game through two deals, Kelso slipped into a chair which an unlucky gamester vacated with a sickly smile, and opening a well-supplied wallet, he began to play as though he meant business clear through.

Haslam watched over his shoulder for a short time, but he seemed strangely nervous for one of his disposition, glancing frequently at the face of his watch, biting his lips and frowning as he noted the tediously slow passage of time.

He saw Pat McCarthy enter the room, followed in straggling order by his gang, the majority of them dressed in their "Sunday best," although fine feathers could never make fine birds—or gentlemen—of any of them. The genuine "tough" was far too plainly written on their faces for any one to mistake their character.

At their entrance Burt Fouser frowned darkly and slipped a hand into his bosom where a brace of derringers rested, but Pat McCarthy forced a smile and passed them by without more than a deprecatory wave of his hand. He had more important business on hand that night. The impudent tramp of the past day might rest in ease for the present, so far as he was concerned.

Solemn Saul obediently went over his list of tricks and delusions until the hunchback declared himself satisfied for the time being, and bade him put up his tools.

"I don't want to wear you all out at one lesson," he laughingly observed, his harsh voice really sounding agreeable, so genuine was the pleasure it contained. "But mind; you're to stop with me until I give you leave to take to your wings again!"

"I won't run off 'thout fu'st givin' ye fa'r warnin'," nodded Solemn Saul, actually smiling, either with pleasure at having given satisfaction to his strange employer, or else from the mellowing effect of the frequent glasses of good liquor he had swallowed. "While I hain't signed no contract as yet, mind ye, I ain't sayin' that I won't do it ef I don't git wuss off the notion afore day comes."

"I'll let it go at that, for now," nodded Burt, lightly, "but I'll have another whack at you in the morning. I'm going to learn all the ins and outs of that game, if I have to make you a partner in The Shades—chew on that, over night, please!"

He offered to place the staff in safety, but

Solemn Saul clung to it obstinately, declaring that he'd as soon lose his right hand.

"Not that I'm so monstrous bad in love with the durned ole club, ye want to know," he dolefully uttered, eying the implement with the deepest aversion, even while grasping it the most tenaciously. "I'd give all I expect to be wu'th ef I could only see the last o' it! Which is why I'm huntin' that spook, Bildad Barzilla Bird! Sech a name to go to bed with! They ain't no sech p'izen critter, but I cain't help that. I swore I'd find him, an' I've got to keep trampin' ontel I do!"

"But if there is no such person?"

"So much the wuss fer me!" groaned the Sad Man from San Saba. "I said I was bendin' double under a cuss, an' right thar you've got it!"

The hunchback coaxed Solemn Saul to take another drink from his private bottle, then led him, now actually growing cheerful, from table to table, dropping here and there a coin and insisting on Saul's playing it for himself. He seemed to forget his own awful deformity in his wish to interest and cheer up his new found friend, and Pap Fouser even suffered a smile to light up his darkly stern face as he saw how his idolized son was enjoying himself.

At the second table which they visited, Solemn Saul "hit a lucky streak" from the very first, and grew so interested in the game that he filled the first seat which was vacated, and it was not until he took breath at the end of the deal that he noticed Burt had left him.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PHANTOM SINGER.

"Hold on! Stop the game! Play fair ef it ain't nobody but a mis'able critter from San Saba that— Who's stole my mascot?" spluttered Solemn Saul, staring about with owl's eyes in vain quest of his deformed employer. "Suffer-in' grandpap o' broodin' c'larity! Sorrowful sisters o'— Eh?"

A cool hand closed lightly upon his shoulder, and the man with the shells looked up to see Pap Fouser bending over him to utter:

"There is nothing to be alarmed at, my friend. Burt felt his headache coming on, and so slipped away without disturbing you. He asked me to take his place, and see that you had whatever you wished for."

"Ef I on'y could!" groaned the sad man, dolefully shaking his pow, hopeless grief once more gaining the upper hand, though he still showed signs of over indulgence in the flowing bowl. "Ef I on'y mought! Ef you could jest grip a p'izen critter by the scruff o' the neck an' the bosom o' his britches an' run him right up afore the two eyes o' me! Ef that critter would on'y say he was the 'riginal, simon pure Bildad Barzilla Bird! But he won't, an' you cain't, an' it never will, an' it ain't never no use nohow—billy-be-durned to the hull rigamaddoodle!"

"If there be such a person as your Bird in Quivering Asp, you shall have him brought face to face with you before to-morrow night," Pap Fouser quietly uttered, adding before moving from his position behind the seat occupied by the tramp from Texas: "If there is anything you want, my friend, call for it. I am acting as Burt's deputy, remember."

With a grave bow which Solemn Saul was too drunk to notice, apparently, the proprietor moved slowly away, unheeding the covert looks and subdued comments drawn out by his recent words and actions.

Never before had he been known to exhibit such positive interest in living being, outside of his own son, nor could any one then present remember having seen him look so pleasant, even smiling at times as though his thoughts were very agreeable.

Who was this rough-looking and uncouth-tongued fellow? How had he wrought this miracle? And how long would it last?

Solemn Saul gave no signs of either surprise or pleasure, but with his snug little winnings beneath his curving fingers, he impatiently waited for the deal to begin afresh.

"Sech a run o' luck!" he mumbled, barely above his breath as he watched the dealer deftly "rip" the deck preparatory to slipping it into the silver box for dealing. "Never steered up ag'inst the like sence I was— But it's hoodooed now! Don't I know it? Whar's my dandy little mascot? Who run him off, an' why did they done it? Jest fer to knock my streak o' luck tail-on-end! Don't I know it? Ain't it bin that way ever sence— I say, boss!" and he thrust his dolorous face as far across the table as his long neck would permit, the bare ghost of a hope flickering in his glassy eyes as he whined: "You don't happen to be named Bildad Barzilla Bird, I don't reckon, be ye?"

"Not to my knowledge, stranger," was the curt response, and which probably would have been still terser only for the recent speech of the proprietor. "Make your game, gentlemen!"

Pap Fouser moved here and there, his actions restless or unusually active for him, now and then slipping a check or two into the hand of some unlucky player, "just for luck," as he would softly whisper in explanation.

Among others who noticed this unusual animation was Selby Haslam, who seemed to grow more restless as time crept on and brought nearer the usual hour when, if ever, the musical mystery of The Shades was wont to be heard from.

The stout, prosaic-looking lawyer was almost the last person in Quivering Asp whom one would think of charging with romance, and he himself would have been swift to deny the silly imputation of having fallen in love with a voice; and yet, this was very near being true.

The hidden singer made a deep impression on his mind the first time he listened to that marvelously pure and melodious sound. This impression had deepened and grown more intense with each subsequent solo, and he had spent many a crafty hour in trying to discover who and what this musical mystery really was.

He had even gone to Pap Fouser and hinted at his willingness to pay any reasonable price for an introduction to the phantom singer, only to be coldly repulsed.

That was something beyond the power of the speaker to grant. If the owner of that voice wished a wider circle of acquaintances, and would intimate as much, that would be a different thing. Such intimation had never as yet reached him. Should it do so, he would not forget the request just made. But—perhaps it would be healthier, as well as more gentlemanly, not to crowd the matter, or seek to remove by trickery or force the mask which the owner of that voice preferred wearing for the present.

Selby Haslam noticed that Pap Fouser carefully refrained from giving any hint as to the gender of his musical mystery, though there could scarcely be a doubt on that point. And yet, at first, after noting the almost girlishly beautiful half-face, the lawyer fancied that Burt Fouser might possibly be that singer, despite his harsh notes, and he devoted the better part of a week to proving his surmise false or true.

The former, most assuredly! In all that time he never heard a smooth or clear note from the deformed, though he caught him in a score different moods. And then—he chanced to overhear Tina Cramer softly humming a song which, only a night or two before, he had heard from beyond the curtained door at the rear of the gambling-hall! And not only that, but he could take oath her voice was the same as that which had so powerfully interested him of late!

It hardly seemed reasonable, and yet—why not? The singer was religiously screened from observation. Pap Fouser himself always stood guard near the curtained door, as though to fend off any over-eager inspection by his more impressive or drunken guests. No one ever saw the phantom singer come to or leave The Shades.

Stranger things than that had come to pass, and would again. The mystery itself, to say nothing of that peculiarly charming voice, drew considerable custom to the gaming tables, and Pap Fouser could afford to pay a handsome salary for a few minutes' labor. And though Mother's Kitchen was doing a fair trade, it could hardly be said that the Cramer family were growing rich off their profits.

Thus the interested lawyer was wont to reason, and pretty well convinced himself that Tina Cramer must be that unseen songstress, but he was not contented to rest at any intermediate point. He determined to have his last doubts solved, let the cost be what it might, and he believed that this would take place on the night in question.

This it was that made him so restless that evening, and as the hour of midnight grew close at hand, he crossed over and gently touched Leslie Kelso on the arm, muttering so that his ear alone could hear:

"All eyes open, now! Stick to me, if you're wise!"

Pap Fouser was passing from table to table, dropping a whisper in the ear of each dealer as he moved on. At the end of the deal then in progress, each dealer slipped his implements into his drawer, sitting grave and silent, as though simply automata.

"Gentlemen," began Pap Fouser, standing in his accustomed position near the curtained door which apparently formed the principal barrier between the phantom singer and its audience. "It may sound strange as coming from my lips—a saloonkeeper and proprietor of a gambling-hall—but life is not altogether made up of rustling for pelf. Gold is good, but there are things far better. Among them honor and innocence and purity of soul. Some among you are smiling at my daring to utter such sentiments. I don't blame you. God knows I'm low and mean and evil enough, but God also knows that I would be even worse were it not that He has given me such an intense love of music. That is perhaps the only redeeming trait in my character."

"But I did not ask your attention simply to say this. Many of you know what to expect; those who are here for the first time to-night will soon comprehend. To them, as to older

patrons, I simply say, oblige me by keeping perfect order for a few minutes. If you are not fond of good singing, please take your departure now, to save trouble and disturbance."

There was a little buzz of anticipation, but no one made any move toward leaving the room. Even Solemn Saul seemed eager to learn what this peculiar address really prefaced.

Pap Fouser lifted his hand with a gesture commanding silence, and after a brief pause, tapped gently on the wall with his knuckles.

Almost immediately the hidden voice made itself heard, soft and low, as though far in the distance, but indescribably sweet and full of melody. Little by little the volume grew and seemed to come nearer, until the long room was filled with that marvelous voice.

If there were words to the song, none of those present could distinguish or understand them. All they knew was that sweeter, richer, more powerful yet perfectly commanded tones had never before saluted their hearing.

Leslie Kelso, himself no mean musician, and a good judge of singing, gave a quick breath of surprise, and the bored expression fled from his face. He had not anticipated anything of this nature. It was simply a revelation!

"Steady!" softly breathed Selby Haslam, gripping the arm of his client, his own eyes fairly aglow with excitement. "Watch and wait."

Of all within that well-filled apartment, Pap Fouser seemed the most thoroughly absorbed in that wonderful voice. His head was bowed on his bosom, his back toward the majority of the audience, but there were a few present who could see his profile, and more than one of them noted the sparkle of tears as they slowly trickled from his lashes.

It would be worse than vain for me to attempt anything like a description of that singing. The phantom voice seemed to fairly revel in its own melody, passing from grave to gay, now sinking until its spellbound audience fairly held their breath through fear of losing the delicious strain, then rising and swelling until the entire room was filled with the wondrous music.

Yet all present were not affected alike. Even Selby Haslam showed that he could spare thoughts for something else, and his eyes snapped and sparkled wickedly as he saw a tall, coarsely dressed fellow in felt hat slouched far over his brows, noiselessly sidling along the wall in the rear of the entranced Pap Fouser.

Little by little, foot by foot, with frequent pauses as though he was hardly conscious of his own movements, and much as though he was unwittingly drawn on by that wondrous song, the ruffian made his way along the side wall until within a long pace of the proprietor. There he paused for a longer period, his dark face turned as though to bend his ear in keener listening, his bead-like eyes glittering in the light of the brilliant chandeliers.

In reality his gaze rested on the face of Selby Haslam, waiting for a signal which was not long delayed.

The lawyer glanced keenly around him, to make sure that all was in readiness for carrying out his evil plot, then his plump white hand rose tremblingly to his face.

An instant later, the spell which had fallen over the audience was broken after a most startling fashion.

The athletic ruffian behind Pap Fouser drew a rusty coupling-pin from his sleeve, and striding forward dealt the proprietor a cruel blow with the heavy iron on the side of his head, knocking him against the wall with sickening force, to rebound and fall in a quivering heap on the sanded floor.

"Down with the devil!" howled Pat McCarthy in affected rage, as the ruffian leaped across the shivering body of his victim and hurled his muscular shoulders against the curtained door, making the whole end of the frame building quiver with the shock.

The section-boss led his whole gang forward amid the wildest excitement, and lent his own powerful body to the attack on the door. It was torn from its fastenings, and—

"Back, you devils!" croaked Burt Fouser, both hands armed as he guarded another door just beyond. "You've got to mount me first!"

CHAPTER XXII.

SOLEMN SAUL WINS HIS SPURS.

With a face half-saint, half-demon, the hunchback stood on guard, an ugly-looking derringer in each hand, his single eye glowing as if backed with living coals.

This was so utterly unexpected to them all, so different from what the ruffianly gang expected to uncover, that they fell into confusion for the moment, even Pat McCarthy feeling at a loss what to do next.

Possibly the deformed realized this, or he may have hoped to gain a little more time for the escape of the mysterious songstress, for he withheld his fire, harshly crying aloud in menacing tones:

"Keep back, I say, you curs! You can't touch her while I've power to pick a trigger or deal a blow from—"

Selby Haslam had gained a position from whence he expected a free and unobstructed

view of what lay beyond that curtained door, and as he saw only the hunchback instead of the singer in whom he felt such an intense interest, he gave a curse of savage disappointment. And now, in his mad rage he cried out in a hoarse, disguised voice:

"Down him, then! Show up the musical beauty, men!"

Pat McCarthy was looking back over his shoulder just then, and he caught a slight signal which told him to obey the voice which, in his excited bewilderment, he failed to recognize. That was enough, and he leaped forward with a grating cry:

"Show her up, me b'yes!"

The movement checked the fierce warning from the hunchback, for he saw that only quick and desperate work could gain his ends. And his derringers exploded almost together, his first shot sending Pat McCarthy reeling blindly back to fall through the doorway, and his second piling another burly ruffian on top of his boss.

Beyond, all was confusion the most intense. All save those more deeply interested in the evil plot, had been so wholly bound up in listening to that marvelously perfect voice, never even dreaming of the sleeping volcano which was so soon to explode, that even the boldest and strongest-nerved among them were taken wholly aback. And for the most part they seemed only to think of saving themselves, when that first horrible spell was shattered.

Not the least thoroughly surprised was the tramp from Texas, and he stared in wide-eyed amazement as he saw that athletic ruffian fell Pap Fouser without the slightest provocation or warning. He sprang to his feet, staff in hand, as he saw this, and instinctively moved toward the spot, as if to arrest the dastardly rascal, only to be caught in a frightened mass as the guests surged further away at the rush of the gang under lead of Pat McCarthy.

"Sufferin' grandpap o'— Let up, ye durned feared-cats!" the sad man howled, grasping his staff by its middle and mercilessly rapping every skull that barred the way, after a fashion that would have delighted a professor of the quarter-staff.

In a single breath he had cleared himself from that tangle, and he did so just in time to see the door go down and reveal Burt Fouser standing on guard before the second door, boldly facing the gang.

Before he could do or say aught further, that covert signal and that disguised voice hurled the section-boss and his men upon the dauntless youth, to reel back with cries of angry dismay as those fatal explosions came flashing into their faces.

"Good boy! an' I kin eat the critter as says I'm a-lyin'!" yelled the man with the shells as he sprang forward, whirling his polished staff about his head in readiness for hot and heavy work the instant he should get within striking distance. "Back him up, durn ye fer cowards! Will ye let sech a p'izen gang— Down ye go, fer luck!"

There was no excuse for his making a mistake, since all save the section gang itself had shrunk back from that end of the room as powder began to burn, and Solemn Saul went in to win with a hearty good will, his first blow felling the rear-most member of the gang.

"Sock it to 'em, little boss!" he cried at the top of his voice in hearty encouragement as he saw the gang surge forward with fierce howls of fury and just for revenge on the slayer of their chief.

He had time and breath to say no more, for leaping over the body of his first prize, Solemn Saul landed in the thick of the row, striking hard and swift, seeming as though he had half a score arms, and as many stout clubs to keep them occupied.

Then—

As so frequently happens in such cases, the lights were shattered and darkness cast over the scene. Just why or how, no one seemed to know, and most assuredly no one paused to ask just then.

There came an awful, frightful struggle to see which should be the first to gain the outer air, and wild yells, oaths, curses, and even screams of terror, rendered the scene a glimpse of pandemonium.

There were blows exchanged, and a few shots fired, either by accident or by men who had temporarily gone mad with fright, but the crowded room was cleared with far greater rapidity than might have been expected under the circumstances. The barkeepers, who armed themselves and rushed from their stations to lend a hand in restoring order, were mercilessly knocked down and trampled under foot by the stampeding mob, who thought of pausing only when fairly out of the building.

The last of the frightened fellows had hardly cleared the saloon when the Marshal of Quivering Asp, backed by a couple of deputies whom he had picked up on the run, crossed the threshold, and catching up a lighted lamp from the shelf behind the bar, shouted aloud as he hastened to the curtainless archway:

"Hands up and empty, in the name o' the law!"

For a single breath there was silence, then

a hoarse, barely recognizable voice gasped forth:

"Burt—my son—my poor—"

"Sufferin' grandpap o' sin an' sorer!" came a panting echo to the tones of Pap Fouser choked and smothered with grief, fear and bodily weakness combined.

"Fair warning, all!" sharply cried the marshal, as, lamp held over and back of his head in order to keep from blinding and rendering his eyes useless in carrying out his threat, he entered the gambling hall with pistol cocked and ready. "I'll blow the man through that dares to pull a gun or try to run!"

"Him first—my poor, crippled boy!" gasped Pap Fouser, painfully dragging himself to his feet by means of the wall against which he had been leaning when that dastardly stroke was delivered.

"Burt, little boss," added Solemn Saul, from out the darkness beyond that splintered door. "It's your pap that's callin' of ye, son. Caint ye jest grunt a weenty bit, ef nothin' more?"

But there was no response, and with a choking groan of unutterable misery, Pap Fouser crept toward the door, supported by the wall until the marshal motioned one of his deputies to lend him an arm.

For though several bodies lay in sight, senseless or dead, all others of that evil gang had joined the mob in flight, and were now nowhere to be seen.

"I'll be man enough to hold all level, I reckon," the marshal muttered to his other assistant. "You go and fetch a doctor as quick as legs can carry you. This is going to pan out a mighty black job, I'm beginning to fear."

The fellow hastened away at top speed, and the marshal passed through the open doorway, holding his lamp so that it cast its rays in advance, to shine upon Solemn Saul, staff beside him, squatting near the door over which Burt Fouser had stood guard, the head of the deformed young man resting in his lap.

"It's ugly work, boss, an' I reckon it'll be wuss afore it's any better," muttered the man with the shells, looking up as the marshal entered the little apartment. "Ef the boy don't come round, it'll clean murder his pap. I know it!"

"And who may you be?" suspiciously demanded the official, failing to recognize that face or figure as one familiar to Quivering Asp.

"The wust lucked critter you ever met in all your borned days, boss, I do reckon," was the response, couched in the doleful whine which seemed to be second nature to the tramp, though he had dropped it while the excitement lasted. "Jest nobody but Saul Sunday, I ain't."

"What took you into the row? What part did you play in it? I'll pinch you almighty tight if you can't read your title clear, my fine fellow," with a scowl of suspicion, judging, as many another is wont, the man by his dress and outward looks.

"It'd be jest my luck," dolefully groaned the sad man, his long face seeming to lengthen; but before either could say more, Pap Fouser came near enough to catch a glimpse of the face of his beloved son, lying so still and deathlike on that friendly knee, and no longer needing that supporting arm, he sprang forward and caught that senseless form to his heart, a groan of unutterable agony welling up in his throat.

Solemn Saul silently slipped away, leaving father and son together, knowing that nothing could be done for either until medical aid should arrive. In subdued tones he hastily told the marshal how the row began, and declared that Pat McCarthy and his gang were at the bottom of it.

"Anyhow they done the heavy work," he amended his statement on a second thought. "But some p'izen critter in the crowd aigged 'em on when the lad had 'em balted short with his guns. I didn't see him, but I'd know his bazoo ag'm ef I was ever to hear it out loud!"

"Well, Pat'll never lead another rush, that's a dead moral!" grimly uttered the marshal, rising from his examination of the burly body.

He had rolled it over upon its back, and the lamplight shone down on a round spot marking where the heavy ball had entered his brain from almost directly between the eyes. Death must have been almost instantaneous.

Neither had the hunchback's second bullet gone astray, though its recipient was still faintly breathing, though it needed only a second glance to assure the practiced eyes of the marshal that he would never regain his consciousness.

There were two of the gang lying insensible, badly battered by the staff of the man with the shells, and these were promptly secured beyond the power of flight, just as the doctor came bustling in, accompanied by the second deputy.

It was only after repeated requests that Pap Fouser recognized the medical man and would permit him to place the deformed in a position fit for making an examination of his hurts. And then, still unconscious of his own terrible injuries, the father breathlessly waited for the verdict, trembling like a leaf.

The physician was very grave as he ended his preliminary examination, finding three several knife-wounds, all deep and serious enough. As he tried to trace their course as well as he could

without a probe, a faint groan came to the lips of the deformed, and Pap Fouser shivered with still more acute pain. His love was so intense that he felt in ten-fold proportion each pang his child was called upon to endure.

"Save him, doctor, and I'll give you every dollar I've got in the wide world!" he gasped, hoarsely, bending to kiss the scarred cheek of his idolized son.

"Of course we'll save him, dear sir," with brisk professionalism. "And I'll do my best without anything like such a princely reward. But it's a serious case, and he'll require the tenderest nursing if—"

"I'll nuss him up clusser an' cleaner nor a sick kitten, boss!" eagerly muttered Solemn Saul, pressing forward, with something suspiciously like a tear in his little gray eyes. "I ain't much fer looks, I know," shrinking humbly back as the doctor turned to stare in amazement at such a request from one so utterly unsuitable to act as nurse. "But I kin do the nussin' act clean up to—"

"Clear out, you rascal!" scowled the physician, his lip curling with scorn and anger at such presumption. "Marshal, run that fellow in if he thrusts himself forward again!"

"Hold on!" came huskily from Burt Fouser, as he feebly turned his head that way, a gleam of reason in his single eye. "I want—let him—with me—"

"He shall, dear boy," huskily murmured the father. "I'll kill the man who tries to cross your lightest wish, my poor boy!"

Burt Fouser muttered something about the shells and little joker, then his eye closed and he lay like one already a corpse.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER THE SMOKE CLEARS AWAY.

If Selby Haslam had not been so thoroughly enraged by this totally unexpected fiasco, instead of the complete success on which he had so firmly counted, he would hardly have risked so much more. But there was no time for taking a second thought. To hesitate now was to lose all hopes of unavailing the phantom singer, and perhaps be called upon to pay a heavy price for indulging his curiosity this far.

Yet, could he have foreseen the consequences to follow that disguised cry, almost beyond a doubt he would have omitted it, rather than run up such a heavy score for future settlement.

He never stopped to reflect whether or no the hunchback would keep his stern threat. All he could think of just then was that Burt Fouser stood guard before the door through which his musical mystery must have made her escape, and that every moment lost now but gave her a better chance for passing forever beyond reach. For, of course, she would never again venture to The Shades after such a reception as this.

Hence it was that he shouted the words that sent Pat McCarthy and the man nearest his side rushing on to their death.

Those loud explosions made him start and stagger, a short, harsh ejaculation escaping his lips, and for the moment Leslie Kelso, who was close beside the lawyer, felt that a chance bit of lead must have hit him hard. Instead, it was the shock with which Haslam recognized what all this might mean for him, in the end!

He gripped the arm of his client as he shrunk back, hoarsely crying as the tumult and confusion grew greater:

"Stick together and make for outside! There's going—"

Solemn Saul was adding his wild charge to the racket, and then, to make confusion worse confounded, the chandeliers were shattered, just how or by whom was never revealed.

Haslam and Kelso were caught in the middle of that blind, unreasoning stampede, and though the nature of the jam prevented anything like a wide separation, for all either knew to the contrary, the other might be crushed to the floor, helpless and dying under those furiously trampling feet.

Kelso was new to such business, but he did not quite lose his head during those breathless moments, and thanks to his athletic training, he was carried full two-thirds the length of the long room on the backs or shoulders of his terror-stricken companions.

Thus being lifted above the dead level, he could see the lights of the saloon more clearly, and realizing the fresh peril awaiting at the substantial archway, where the passage narrowed to one-half the width of the room, and where the living mass seemed already jammed beyond the possibility of clearing itself without the sacrifice of more lives than one, he literally passed over the mass of heads and shoulders to leap lightly to the floor beyond, almost the first man to escape from the building.

The awful jam was broken by the yielding of one side of the archway, and as the crowd came tumbling forth, panting, yelling, cursing, still in that senseless panic, Leslie Kelso stood to one side and watched keenly for the appearance of his lawyer.

Satan favors his own, only too often, and so it was in this case. Breathless, hatless, almost coatless, but sound in life and limb, Selby Has-

lam came out of the saloon in company with a dozen others, to be singled out, clutched and dragged aside by his client.

"What next?" sharply demanded the younger man, for Haslam was too completely out of breath for speech, just then. "If they smoke what you played in yonder, salt won't save you, man!"

Haslam rudely clapped a hand over those lips, but there was little danger to be feared from eavesdroppers in that time of confusion.

The building was cleared of all who were able to navigate without assistance, it appeared, and fully one-half of that number had already fled in haste, probably to prevent any further trouble to themselves should a regular investigation be instituted. The other moiety were some of them yelling fire at the top of their voices, while others loudly urged the pressing need for an immediate inquest, but none cared to follow even when the city marshal and his two deputies entered The Shades, revolvers in hand.

Selby Haslam drew Leslie Kelso aside where the shadows lay deepest, and while recovering his breath and making sure he had suffered no serious injury during that awful scramble in the dark, he cleared his muddled brains as best he knew how.

He believed he had seen Pat McCarthy reel and fall before the exploding derringers of the deformed, and at such close quarters it seemed far from probable that the burly section-boss could have escaped death, unless Burt Fouser had simply aimed to disable. If Pat was dead—if his lips were forever sealed—all might yet be well!

He was not kept long in suspense. The deputy who came out in search of a physician, dropped a word or two as he hurried along. This was shortly after supplemented by the brief report of one of the faro dealers who had stolen back to secure his cash-drawer and what could be retrieved of the wrecked chip-rack.

There were several candidates for the bone-yard, and one of them was Pat McCarthy!

"That lets me out, if it is true!" muttered Haslam, gripping the arm of his fellow-schemer with a force that unconsciously made Kelso flinch before wresting the member free. "I've got to know that much, though! If he can't squeal, I'm clear. If he can—you'll have to play your hand out without my help, I'm fearful, dear boy!"

Kelso shivered a bit at the old familiar title, but he was too deeply involved to turn squeamish at the present stage of the game, and crushing down his instinctive horror of death in violent guise, he volunteered to enter the building and make sure just what they had to expect.

Haslam was eager enough to agree, for he was really anxious as to the safety of his own precious neck, and hardly cared to put himself too prominently forward until the very worst was known.

"They'll never give you a thought, dear boy," he muttered, encouragingly. "Look at the others creeping in for a look. You can find out for sure about Pat without asking any leading questions. Go it—and you'll find me waiting here when you come back!"

Still fortune favored the schemers, for Kelso found out all he needed to know without the slightest trouble. Pat McCarthy was dead, and doubtless had never realized what had hurt him.

Selby Haslam received this report in silence, and slipping a hand through the arm of his client, he led the way direct to his little office, entering and locking the door behind them before striking a match and lighting the hanging-lamp.

He produced a bottle of whisky, and placed it with glasses on the table, just as once before on that same evening. He dropped into one of the seats, drawing a long breath of relief, his face unusually sober and clouded as he met that cold, hard gaze.

"You think I've played the fool, Kelso?" he at length ventured, his foxy eyes drooping, his face flushing a little, his hands trembling despite his efforts to seem cool and unconcerned as he poured out a brimming glass of the liquid poison, to toss off at a single gulp.

"Isn't it even worse than that?"

Haslam ventured to show his teeth a bit at this sharp retort.

"What are you kicking about, anyway? Didn't you say I was to follow out whatever plans I deemed best for our cause? Or, for that matter, what license have you for even hinting that I took a hand in the ugly little game those roughts tried to play at The Shades?"

"That won't wash, old fellow," coldly retorted Kelso, taking a seat and helping himself to a stiff dram as he added: "You warned me to watch while waiting, and I did so: so closely that I could make oath it was you who rushed the gang on when it hung back. They were moving as you pulled the wires; that I know. What I want to learn now is just why and for what ends you chose to take such long chances?"

The lawyer seemed rapidly regaining his usual coolness, and in a very matter-of-fact tone he made prompt response:

"That's just what I brought you here to

learn, dear boy. I've literally nothing to conceal from you. We are rowing in the same boat, and though I hesitated to fully confide in you before the explosion came, it was simply in your own interests."

"All that sounds mighty well, Haslam, but isn't it all sound?"

"You can judge for yourself, dear boy," as coolly as ever. "Of course I was looking for you by every train, but on a new road like this, those trains are so preciously independent, coming in behind or ahead of time just as their hands please. And not being sure you would be on hand in time, I had all arrangements made with Pat, to tear the mask from the face of this phantom singer."

"What has that got to do with me? Or our case, for that matter?"

"You heard that wonderful voice; think if it could possibly be owned by any person whom you have met since your arrival in town!"

"You mean the Cramer girl, of course?"

Selby Haslam nodded assent.

"The girl who stands between you and an almost unlimited fortune. The girl whose death or vanishment means untold riches for you!"

"Provided you can break the will, remember!" with a dark frown.

"I've agreed to do that, and I'll keep my word," was the confident reply. "In his eagerness to prevent those whom he so hated from sharing to the remotest degree in his wealth, old Dew laid himself open to blackest disappointment; provided, always, that life and knowledge does not end entirely at the grave!"

"But—confound you, man!" with sudden irritation. "What could you hope to gain even should you prove that this mysterious songstress was indeed the girl you suspect? What gain was sufficient for you to run such long chances? For, if your voice was recognized by other than myself—if your agency in this ugly bit of a row should be fully exposed to the citizens—I wouldn't insure your neck for cent per cent."

"There's not the slightest danger, now Pat McCarthy is past the power of speech," softly laughed the lawyer, refilling his glass.

"You forget that two of his gang were taken prisoners."

"They can't tell what they don't know," was the quick retort. "I dealt with Pat alone, and he agreed to take the entire responsibility on his own shoulders, for increased compensation, of course. So—"

The lawyer checked himself abruptly, bending his ear toward the closed and secured door, at or near which he fancied he had caught a suspicious sound.

There was a brief pause, then a sharp rap echoed against the panel, and a low, dogged voice was heard:

"Open up, boss, an' that mighty quick, too!"

With a swift, silent motion Haslam turned to his desk and produced a handy revolver, slipping it into a side-pocket, his hand still holding it ready for use in case of an emergency.

"Open up, I'm sayin', Haslam!" came the harsh voice, with hardly interval enough to receive an answer. "I know you're in thar!"

"What if I am?" retorted the lawyer, lifting a finger as a token for Kelso to keep silence. "It is long after business hours, and if you're in too big a hurry to wait for day, go shake up some other sleepy unfortunate. I beg of you, my dear fellow!"

"That's too durn thin, boss!" with increased doggedness. "You want to open up, an' in a mighty hurry, too! I hain't got time to waste in palaverin', nuther. I want to skin out o' this as quick as Satan'll let me, but I ain't goin' 'thout my pay fer the work, ye understan'?"

"I don't know you, sir. I owe no man aught, and—"

"You lie, curse ye!" growled the unseen claimant, making the door quiver as he turned the knob and applied pressure upon it. "I'm the man Pat sent in ahead, an' I'm goin' to have my pay or—"

"Come in office hours, and if I owe you anything I'll pay it. I don't know any Pat, and I never—"

The sentence was left incomplete, for with a savage thrust of his broad shoulders the ruffian tore the door from its fastenings, and crossed the threshold revolver in hand.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHECKMATING A BULLY.

HE stopped short, seemingly disconcerted by finding another present with the lawyer whose voice alone had answered him back.

And the surprise of both Kelso and Haslam was hardly less powerful as they instantly recognized the tall, sinister-looking ruffian who had dealt Pap Fouser that cowardly blow from behind.

"I want my money, boss," he uttered, still menacingly, but with barely perceptible uneasiness at finding himself confronted by odds.

Haslam was quick to perceive this, and instantly grew cool and steady-nerved, for he felt that he must show a bold front or suffer.

"What do I owe you, and for what sort of service, my dear sir?" he smoothly uttered, his armed hand hidden in his pocket but silently

shifting until he felt confident he had the ruffian "lined."

The black-browed ruffian flashed an uneasy glance toward the stranger, plainly with growing uneasiness despite his efforts to conceal that weakness.

"You needn't stand on ceremony, dear sir," blandly added the lawyer, catching that glance and putting his own interpretation upon it. "This gentleman is a particular friend of mine. I have no secrets from him, and if you are inclined that way, better do as I advised before you ruined my door—"

He cut himself short at this, a frown sweeping over his face as he abruptly uttered:

"Shut that door, sir!"

It was a bold experiment, but the result fully justified the lawyer. The ruffian hesitated for a little, scowling blackly, but then he turned enough to reach and swing the door to. As the lock was broken by his impetuous assault, he could do nothing more than this.

Unfortunately for himself, he suffered his eyes and his attention to waver for a brief space, but that was long enough for Haslam, who held him covered by a cocked revolver as he turned again, his pistol-hand resting on the little table before him.

"Now stow away that gun of yours, you rascal!" sharply ordered the lawyer, actually surprising himself by his bold demeanor, almost as much as it surprised Leslie Kelso, who was wont to consider him rather a coward than a man of war such as he appeared on this occasion.

The ruffian visibly flinched, but though he made no attempt to lift his weapon, neither did he put it away, muttering hoarsely:

"You've got the drop, but you don't dast to use it, boss! I'm only axin' fer my rightful own, an' you knows it, too!"

"I know that you have broken into my premises without leave or license," was the cold retort. "I know that I have a perfect right to drop you in your tracks, and that I would be praised rather than censured for so doing by all honest citizens. What excuse can you offer for your conduct, you scoundrel?"

The ruffian began to show his teeth, apparently recovering from the back-set so unexpectedly received.

"You cain't drop me so dead but what I kin drag you down to hell in my comp'ny, boss," he sulkily growled, but making no movement toward lifting his weapon. "I don't want to do either, ef I kin git my dues any other way. I want gold, not powder an' lead. You owe it to me, now that Pat McCarthy has croaked! An' I'm goin' to have it, too!"

"Then you're one of Pat's gang? I wouldn't go publishing that interesting fact too openly, if I were in your shoes, my fine fellow," the lawyer laughed, seemingly perfectly at ease.

"What better be you?" viciously retorted the rascal, his dark eyes fairly on fire with poorly smothered rage and excitement. "Pay me what Pat promised me on your account, an' I'll skin out o' town too mighty quick! Ef you don't—ef I'm nabbed afore I kin git away—I'll blow the gaff an' fit a rope mighty snug around that neck o' yours!"

Instead of showing fear at this savage speech, the lawyer laughed softly, his lips curling with pitying scorn as he uttered:

"I think I've seen you before, my fine fellow. I could almost take oath that I saw you knock Pap Fouser in the head with a rusty coupling-pin to-night. And if I have a few moments longer in which to strengthen my memory by gazing on your handsome face and noble figure, I feel confident I could swear to your identity without the slightest hesitation or fear of making a mistake. This being the case, don't you think you would be showing good sense by taking a walk?"

"Who set the ball in motion?" flashed the ruffian, his dark face turning fairly livid with rage at this insolent quietude on the part of the man whom he had thought to bleed freely and without resistance. "Who told Pat McCarthy he'd pay double money to the man that downed Pap Fouser before he had time to kick up a row? Who done all that?"

"I don't know; do you?"

"You lyin', sneerin' devil!" grated the ruffian, fairly driven mad by that insolent composure. "I'll tear your black—"

In his intense excitement he failed to notice the movements of the young blood, but Selby Haslam was more watchful, though he gave no signs to that effect, bending all his powers to hold the rascal bound by that raging spell until—as the ruffian was on the point of risking a shot in his mad lust for revenge, Kelso sprung from his seat and struck him fairly under the jaw, knocking him back against the door.

That support alone hindered him from measuring his full length, and before he could realize what had happened, Kelso deprived him of another revolver in addition to the weapon which fell to the floor as he gave way to that deftly delivered blow.

"Shall I throw him out, Haslam?" demanded Kelso, dropping the weapon on the table and catching the ruffian just as he was sinking to the floor, almost deprived of his senses.

"Not just yet, dear boy," replied the lawyer, his eyes glowing as he added: "See if he hasn't got a knife somewhere— I thought as much," with a short nod of approval as Kelso found an ugly-looking blade. "Now let him catch his breath a bit. I think he'll listen to reason, after this bit of a lesson. If not— Well, a single word from our lips will be enough to fit a mighty snug collar about his neck!"

Kelso frowned darkly, but offered no open objections. Haslam ought to know what he was about, and after all he was the one principally interested.

"If you've got to chin some more, we might as well do what we can to expedite matters," he muttered, pouring a glass of whisky from the bottle and holding it to the lips of the man whom he had "knocked out" so swiftly.

The fellow swallowed the stuff, and it seemed to quicken his recovery, for in a short space of time he was able to stagger to his feet, though ghastly pale and trembling from head to foot.

"I've spotted you now, my man," coldly uttered Haslam, toying significantly with his pistol the while. "Your name is Bully Burgess. You have been working for Pat McCarthy, as a section-hand. You were at The Shades to-night, and you knocked Pat Fouser down from behind. If he isn't dead, he's in a dying condition this minute. Do you know what that means, Bully?"

"I know that you want to jump your bargain an'—"

"Be careful, Bully!" with a menacing motion of his armed hand. "I can make a good deal of allowance for a desperate rascal, but I draw the line at base slander. I never denied an honest debt. I never had any business dealings with Pat McCarthy, save in keeping him from going to the pen on a charge of burglary, years ago."

"He swore you hired the gang to kick up a row at Pap Fouser's. He swore you'd pay me double wages if I'd— if I'd do what I done!" the black-browed ruffian sulkily muttered.

"Pat lied, then, and sold you for a precious little sum," briskly nodded the lawyer. "If you still doubt, go accuse me of this outrage where all Quivering Asp can hear your words. Go—"

"You know I darsent do that," with a vicious snarl.

"Because it would fit a mighty snug noose about your own throat, if the crowd didn't treat you mad-dog fashion: shooting at sight!" the lawyer laughed, softly, but with a hard, pitiless light in his eyes.

"But you know it's gospel truth, boss," muttered the thoroughly cowed bully, completely changing his manner to one of humble entreaty. "You know I done jest what was ordered, an' you'd ought to pay me off, now Pat cain't give me my time. I've got to slope, but how kin I 'thout a dollar to the name o' me? Pay me, boss, an' I'll keep mum to the grave!"

"If you had approached me in a proper spirit, begging as you do now, I might have yielded. As you tried to blackmail me, without the ghost of an excuse in truth, I'll simply say this much: Run while you may, for in the morning, if I'm asked about that foul blow, I'll plainly describe your face and figure, and take oath you're the guilty wretch!"

Without a word the the checkmated bully left the office, hurrying away through the night, leaving Haslam to chuckle over his complete victory.

"It was a risky bluff, but it ended to the queen's taste!" he declared, putting up his weapon as he added: "I'm a wee bit tired, dear boy, and if you can hold your burning curiosity in check for a little longer, I'll move we seek our virtuous couches for a few hours' interview with blessed Morpheus!"

CHAPTER XXV.

"THERE'S NOTHING HALF SO SWEET."

"WAS I so very much to blame, Jim—Mr. Anderson?"

Softly, timidly, barely audible above the sound of buggy wheels and the crunching of gravel under the hoofs of the horses, yet distinct enough to break the spell which had come over Long Jim, of the bridge gang, and cause him to glance quickly into the half-frightened, half-angered face of his dainty little companion.

It was forenoon of the Sabbath—the day following those scenes in and around Quivering Asp to which reference has been made in this chronicle—and with the weather simply perfect, neither too hot nor too cool, with the breeze sufficient to temper the rays of the sun, yet not powerful enough to lift the alkali-impregnated dust to any appreciable extent. With a "real top-buggy," and a span of horses which could be awakened to rapid transit or left to plod stolidly along as circumstances seemed to justify. And, above all, with the prettiest, most bewitching girl of all that section snugly seated at his side!

Surely a man ought to feel perfectly happy under such a rare combination, if ever. But Jim Anderson looked anything but blissfully delighted just then.

"Because if you do, I wish you would be kind

enough to drive me back home, just as quick as we can get there!"

Until the last word was given to the air, Tina Cramer maintained her forced spirit very well, but then her dark eyes dimmed and she averted her face as quickly as possible, indignantly trying to wink those betraying tears to nothingness as soon as possible.

"You don't mean that, Tina?" a little unsteadily uttered Anderson, yet mechanically checking the horses by tightening the reins.

Was he going to take her at her word, without even an effort at coaxing her into a change of determination? After so many delicious hours of still more delightful anticipation, too! The thought lent Tina Cramer both nerve and spirit, and she flashed a glowing look into that grave, troubled face as she retorted:

"Why shouldn't I mean it, Mr. Anderson? Why should I wish to prolong this ride—and I thought it would be just heavenly, too!" with a swift break and catching of her breath. "When you think I was all to blame for that drunken rascal's mean behavior?"

"Why Tina! My little girl—"

"And I thought it my—my duty to tell you, though why—why I should take so much trouble is more than I can—"

Long Jim gave the lines no further thought, for he had better occupation for his hands just then. They were holding that little head, with its charming little face, paling and flushing in quick alternation. His honest brown eyes were gazing earnestly, passionately into those half-angry, half-tearful orbs, until their long lashes drooped to hide the glad yet abashed light which came stealing therein.

"Tina, would I do this if I doubted you in the slightest?" softly uttered Anderson, his voice hardly steady enough for one who could so deliberately ravish a kiss from those red, ripe, pouting lips!

For just a single instant their eyes met, but that was long enough to fully reassure the maiden. Long enough to show her that the dearest of all dreams had come true. Long enough to show her that Long Jim meant that drive to decide their future.

Selby Haslam was only half right when he warned Leslie Kelso that the beauty of Mother's Kitchen was "signed, sealed and ready to be delivered on demand." There was no actual engagement between the lovers, though each felt fairly confident that the other knew how matters stood with them.

This was the first Sabbath which the bridge gang had been able to pass in Quivering Asp for several months, and only by working desperately hard had Long Jim made a success of his hopes.

For several weeks past it was understood that Jim and Tina were to "take a buggy ride," that choicest of all treats in a new section, where neither roads nor teams are plenty or in good condition for such exercise.

Prompt to the minute Jim drove up in front of Mother's Kitchen, and equally as prompt Tina appeared and was lifted rather than helped into the buggy, in which they rattled quickly away, flushing just a bit at the lusty cheers which the "gang," headed by jolly Will Busby, sent after them by way of good luck.

It was hard to mar the perfect enjoyment of such a day, but Tina faithfully redeemed the promise given on the evening before, in low, shaken tones telling just how Sam Hill had insulted her, and how that elegantly dressed stranger had avenged the insult.

Long Jim listened in silence, his face pale, his jaws squarely set, his whole aspect that of a stern judge rather than an indulgent lover, so that, taking everything into consideration, it is hardly to be wondered at that the poor girl should fancy his anger growing against herself.

"If I did not trust you wholly, entirely, Tina, would I be claiming you as my bride—my wife?"

"But—you looked so stern, and—I didn't know—"

Tina failed to finish her broken sentence, and for a very sufficient reason. When the ice is fairly broken, the next plunge comes with so much more ease and comfort. And Jim had waited so long—as lovers count time! And—and—

Never mind, reader. You and I have each of us lived through scenes which neither would care to see described in cold type, and it is well to practice the golden rule occasionally, if only to guard against forgetting its existence entirely!

All this time the pair of ponies were behaving themselves most discreetly, plodding sleepily along the aspen-shaded road, carefully avoiding the deeper ruts and more serious obstacles as though they fully appreciated that blissful oblivion behind them.

But though so deeply in love, and so wholly happy with that shy, sweet confession still singing the most charming of songs in his ear, Jim Anderson managed to get back to earth for a space.

"I'm going to make this a red-letter day in my calendar, Tina," he said, casting a quick, searching glance around them before beginning

to "drive with one hand," after the true lovely fashion. "I'll ask an interview with your parents this evening, and beg of them to give me the dearest, sweetest, most precious," etc., etc.

Tina made no serious objection to either process or proposition. There was hardly any chance of their being observed by envious or evil eyes in that lonely section. And she felt assured that neither Josh nor Sally Cramer could or would seriously object to Anderson.

It was all very sweet, very delicious, and to tell the simple truth, Tina liked to feel that arm about her waist just as much as Jim liked to place it there; but where lives the woman who does not like to exert her authority, especially when the reins have just been placed in her hands?

Tina was not that exception, and ere long the lovers were sitting side by side as demurely and perfectly well-behaved as though they had been married for a full score years.

After all, Jim was not drowned in grief that such should be the case, for he had much to make him serious, and much to talk over with the girl who had just promised to become his wife in due course.

"I always meant it, little one," he said, gravely. "I have looked forward to this day from the very first time I saw your pretty face. I said then that if I couldn't win you for a wife, I'd have to go down to the grave in single-cursedness!"

"You naughty boy—to use swear words!" half-laughing, half-frowning, wholly delicious.

"Have you thought just what it means, Tina?" still more seriously. "One of two things, and I'm afraid you'll find either of them hard enough."

"With you to help me, dear Jim?" softly breathed the maiden, her lustrous eyes lifted to meet his.

Of course there could be but one answer to this, and Jim promptly performed his pleasant duty. Then, with more animation, though still in grave tones, he resumed:

"You know the sort of life I lead as bridge-boss. You know that I am liable at any moment to be called far away for weeks and even months at a stretch, to overlook work, often in such places as would render it impossible for me to take you with me. Of course your parents would be glad to have you stay with them, but that wouldn't make it any the easier for me."

"That is one of the alternatives, Tina. The other: I have a good place offered me if I'll agree to leave this road. It will not only pay bigger, but permit me to be at home, or have you near me nearly all the time. But—and there comes in your trial, little girl!—if I take the place, you would have to leave your parents."

"Poor father!" sighed Tina, her head drooping a little and her eyes dimming with tears at the thought.

Naturally her first thought was given to the weaker. Sally Cramer doubtless was just as dearly loved by the child whom, rightly or wrongly she called daughter, but she was so much stronger, both in mind and in brain. But poor Josh.

"It shall be just as you decide, Tina, after plenty of reflection," gently uttered her accepted lover. "I thought it only right to put the full situation before you, but I'd rather not have you answer hastily. There will be plenty of time, even if your parents do not refuse me."

They both laughed a little at such a ridiculous idea, for each knew well enough that neither Josh nor Sally could ask for a better match than this one promised to be. And each knew that the elder pair liked the big bridge-boss rarely well.

As they rode on, not all the time in a direct line away from town, but keeping in motion while maintaining about the same general distance from Quivering Asp, thanks to the different roads, the lovers began talking of matters and things in general, among them being the unusual disturbance which had taken place at The Shades.

Tina appeared strangely interested in this matter, asking question after question, particularly as to the probable outcome as regarded the injuries of father and son.

"They said the boy was lying very low, though with a fighting chance for life. His father is watching over him, in company with that queer case, Solemn Saul, whom I picked up on the road yesterday. And, do you know, the doctor declares that bad as young Fouser is hurt, the condition of his father is even more serious?"

"Then why is he acting as nurse?" hesitated Tina.

"Because he will not trust any one else to serve his boy. They say he will go mad if the young fellow don't grow better. His life is bound up in the boy, though I never saw a more hideous—"

"I know. I have seen him," murmured Tina, her eyes suddenly drooping, and her color fluctuating for a brief space. "And they say it was all on account of some mysterious singer, or—"

"So I heard," as Tina hesitated. "I heard the voice once, and it almost electrified me. It seemed to come right down from heaven."

"And you fell in love with an empty voice, Jim?"

"Because it reminded me so powerfully of yours, Tina," was the instant response, as he bent toward her with love showing so plainly in his honest eyes. "Of course that could not be, yet for a time I could hardly make myself believe I was not listening to you."

There was a brief silence, broken at length by the maiden, her tone low and slightly unsteady as she murmured:

"Jim, dear, what would you think were I to say that I, too, have heard that mysterious voice?"

"What would I—Tina, child, what do you mean?" almost sharply cried the bridge-boss, a startling fancy flashing into his brain.

But his doubts, if such they may be called, were not to be solved for either good or evil just then. Before the maiden could shape her reply, a sharp, spiteful report rung out from a clump of bushes only a few yards from the road along which the team was passing, and with a short, choking cry, Long Jim Anderson started to his feet, only to fall across the lap of his promised bride.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRUE LOVE AND FALSE.

It all happened with such terrible suddenness.

One moment moving slowly, easily along, conversing quietly, without the remotest idea that personal danger threatened either of them. The next to hear that explosion—to see her lover start to his feet with a horrible sound of agony—to have him fall fairly across her lap as though death had already claimed its prey—and then the affrighted horses dashed away at breakneck speed.

It was a terrible ordeal, and the marvel is that Tina Cramer did not swoon away on the instant. Instead—and just how, she could never explain—she bent over the shivering body of her lover to catch the lines before they could be dragged over the dash, winding them around her little hands and desperately striving to regain the mastery as the frightened brutes plunged swiftly along that rough mountain road, each moment threatening to witness an upset or general smash, the end of which could hardly be other than instant death.

She remembered trying to gain a fair look at the ambush from out of which had sped that treacherous shot, but the only partly-lowered hood of the buggy prevented, and then an abrupt turn in the road carried her out of sight of the spot.

"Tina—God save—"

A choking cry of joy welled up in her throat as she caught this faint, sighing fragment, for it told her death had not yet claimed her dearly beloved. Oh, if she could only get him to town! If she could only procure aid!

Only those few words, hardly distinct enough to be called words; then her lover lay silent, motionless, save when jarred by the wheels bouncing or the springs swaying. And the animals still plunged madly on, the rattle and clatter of their flight but adding to their fears, and rendering their submission still harder to win.

But Tina felt that she was fighting for more than her own life just then. She must get aid for Jim, or he would surely die!

It was well that she was thus nerved, for as the wheels struck another stone, the body was jolted from her lap, to sink in a limp and nerveless heap at her feet.

She dared not relax her grip on the ribbons even in the slightest degree, and though a painful sob choked her sorely at the sight of her loved one lying at her feet, she sensibly fought all the harder, managing to turn the crazy brutes into a side road which would at least prevent her being carried any further from town and help, for some few minutes. And during that period she felt that the victory would be won or defeat insured. Though her arms were nerved with ten-fold her normal powers, already they were weakening under that awful strain.

Fortunately for her, this road almost immediately began to rise, and a very few moments of tugging against that steady strain, with dragging a dead weight up-hill, began to prove beneficial to her hopes. The horses became more subdued, and by the time the top of the hill was gained, the worst was over, so far as the runaway was concerned.

Not until then had Tina dared venture more than a passing glance at her lover, feeling the need of all her powers of mind and body, and knowing that any such gaze must surely unnerve her greatly. But now, with a gasping moan of mingled anguish and fear, she ventured.

To see his hatless head marked with blood, which had collected in a tiny pool at her feet. To her fears it seemed as though Jim had been shot directly through the brain.

With marvelous power and strength Tina managed to lift Anderson into a sitting posture, holding his head between her knees, fearing to

attempt more lest she do worse. He was unconscious, if not dead, and her sole remaining hope was to reach town and medical advice at the earliest possible moment.

A sweeping glance around told her just where she then was, and the shortest practicable route home. She spoke to the panting animals and even touched one of them with the lash, causing both to plunge ahead at a pace which, on such a rough road, would have frightened her half to death under less urgent circumstances. As swiftly as she dared, Tina urged them on, turning into another road, which she knew would carry them directly into Quivering Asp, her scalding tears dropping upon the head of her lover, still steadied between her knees.

It was a strange, even thrilling sight thus presented, but the poor girl never once thought of that. She knew that her only hope lay in gaining medical aid with the shortest possible delay.

She had hardly crossed the ridge and gained half the distance down the gentle slope, when she caught sight of two human figures at no great distance ahead. At first she thought these were the dastardly assassins whose treacherous shot bade fair to forever wreck her life, but even as she threw her strength upon the ribbons, the men turned, no doubt startled by the unusual sound of wheels in that lonely spot, and she recognized in one the young stranger who had avenged the insult offered her by the drunken gambler.

She uttered a sharp cry as she made the discovery, giving her team slack lines in her half-crazed haste to gain assistance, and Selby Haslam sharply cried out:

"It's a runaway, Kelso! It's—"

Only Kelso heard what followed his recognition of Tina Cramer, but something of its purport may be inferred when it is considered how rapidly the stout lawyer scrambled out of the road, as though fairly beside himself with terror. A runaway team is so dangerous.

But Kelso did not follow that cowardly example. He braced himself close beside the track, nerved to leap at the heads of the maddened creatures, only to be amazed as Tina jerked them up until their tails brushed the ground, hoarsely gasping:

"Help! for the love of Heaven! He's dying—he's—"

Her voice choked, and she could say no more, but the lines fell unheeded from her fingers and she bowed her head until her pale lips could drop kisses upon that blood-stained brow.

Kelso caught the horses' heads as they would have started forward again, and sharply shouted to his lawyer.

Selby Haslam came back, scowling blackly into the pale face of his client after a keen glance showed him there was no danger of Tina's noticing him or his looks just then. And he gratingly muttered:

"You idiot! Why couldn't you let her go to the devil?"

There was no reply, and he dared say nothing further, for Tina at that juncture chokingly cried out to him:

"Are you a doctor? Do something for him! Bring him back to life, and I'll forever bless you, sir!"

Selby Haslam touched that wound with his forefinger, giving a little start as he found the bone directly beneath the wound apparently as sound as ever, but he shook his head gravely as he replied:

"I'm not a physician—unluckily for him! But I'll get in and drive him to town if you'll alight and permit my friend to escort you to your home. I think—"

Tina cut him short by gathering up the lines and striking the still fiery team with her whip, tearing their heads free from Kelso's relaxed grip, and barely escaping knocking him flat with a wheel. She would trust no man to hasten her loved one to needed care. If he lived he should owe it all to her!

"May you break that dainty neck into seventeen pieces before you get half-way to town!" viciously hissed the lawyer, glaring after her, his hands clinched, his face anything but lovely in his mad disgust.

"Why did you try to take her place as driver, then?" coldly retorted Kelso, daintily flicking the dust from his garments with the aid of a silken kerchief.

"To try and remedy the infernal folly of which you were guilty, of course," sourly responded the lawyer, flashing a swift sidelong look into that dark face. "Will you never learn to take a hint? How long has it been since you agreed with me that a dead heiress can serve us far better than a living one?"

Kelso made no reply, though his brows wrinkled darkly.

"And of course you had to play the hero just when another minute might have cleared the pathway most beautifully! Confound it, man!" in a fresh outburst of hot indignation. "Do you know who that fellow was in the carriage with her?"

"I didn't stop to ask, but I suppose it must have been that long-geared fellow—Anderson, I think you said."

"And you had to risk your neck to save them both!"

"Well, that was my first intention, dear boy," with an irritating imitation of the lawyer's favorite term of address. "But the lady did the work, and I simply went through the motions. I should have felt most awfully silly had the fair one been in a fit condition to appreciate the ridiculous."

"Are you never to be trusted, man? Are you ever to permit yourself to be swayed from one side to the other, like an infernal pendulum, by every new turn in the game? Devil bless me if I don't begin to believe you're actually in love with the girl!"

"Your name should be Solomon! For, do you know, I really fancy I *am* in love, dear boy?" laughed the man from New York.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BACK TO MOTHER'S KITCHEN.

TINA CRAMER lost no time in putting distance between herself and the two schemers, though she had not the slightest suspicion of the truth, or that in acting so promptly she had almost certainly prevented Selby Haslam from dyeing his hands still darker with crime.

And yet, though such was undeniably the evil idea which led the plotting lawyer to propose driving the unconscious bridge-boss to Quivering Asp, he might not have found the deed nearly so easy of execution in the end; for almost before the team had carried them out of ear-shot of the spot where Kelso and Haslam were still standing, Anderson gave signs of recovery.

"Jim—dear Jim!" sobbed Tina, trying to shake from her eyes the hot tears that almost blinded her to her duty of guiding the ponies.

"Tina, my—what is the matter?"

Strangely faint and very unsteady that voice, but Long Jim partly lifted his head from the rest to which he owed his retention in the buggy, one hand lifting painfully to his injured head.

It was almost more than the poor child could bear! She had feared him dead or dying. She had never thought to hear his voice again. And only for the steady pulling at the ribbons by the still fiery ponies, Tina must surely have given way for the time being.

Long Jim felt something hot fall upon his brow, and heard his loved one sobbing hysterically. Still confused by that fearful shock, his brain partially benumbed, he still contrived to bend his neck until he could look up into that pale, tear-stained countenance.

The sight startled, almost frightened him, and proved about as good a restorative as could have been administered to him just then.

"Tina—crying!" he muttered, his tones thick and somewhat uncertain, but showing a wonderful return of bodily strength so soon after that dangerous hurt.

He only dimly comprehended what had happened, and his actions were little more than purely instinctive at first. He put out a hand and closed his fingers on the lines, duly marveling that he could do no more than grasp them. But it was enough that he made the sign, for Tina instantly checked the team, half wild with mingled fear and hope.

She never knew just what she said or did, nor was Jim Anderson very much the wiser for a few minutes after that stoppage. The effort to lift himself from his cramped position in the bottom of the buggy brought on a blinding spell of vertigo, and with his blood-marked face he looked more than ever the dead or dying man.

But this did not last long. The treacherous shot had worked little injury, after all, though Jim felt that he would hardly require an introduction before recognizing a headache for a few days to come.

Little by little his senses grew clearer and his bodily powers were restored in like proportion. With a finger tip he traced the course taken by the bullet, forcing a laugh as he begged Tina to congratulate him on the unusual thickness of his skull.

It was a sorry jest, and not particularly well carried off, either. As far as he could tell by such primitive means, Jim believed the shot had glanced from without fracturing his skull, but the probing turned him very faint and he was only too glad to desist as Tina tremblingly touched his face with her cold lips.

He leaned back against the hood, forcing a smile but feeling as though everything was fading and slipping far away from him during those first few moments. Still he fought against the horrible sensation, and in a goodly measure succeeded. At least he did not fall into unconsciousness again, and as Tina started up the ponies, feeling that medical aid must be obtained else her loved one would perish before her very eyes, he forced a faint laugh, declaring that the motion did him good.

Right or wrong in this, Long Jim Anderson really began to pick up strength and reason in a remarkable manner, and though Quivering Asp was not far distant, it was not yet in sight when the wounded man began to search for some plan by which his hurts could be kept from recognition, at least until he could leave Tina in safety at her home.

"Your home, too, Jim," the girl hastened to

utter, smiling through the tears which still dimmed her eyes. "You're not going to run away just as I've fairly found you and—"

She was not yet equal to much talk, though she bravely kept the ponies to work, carefully guiding them over the rough road, and avoiding all jolting obstructions as much as possible. But if her tongue was feeble, her eyes proved eloquent enough for her lover to fully comprehend all she would have urged.

He hesitated, and while doing so wondered that such should be the case. Why should he not go back to Mother's Kitchen, over which he had for months past lodged whenever stopping over night in town. Yet now he felt something undefined, unrecognizable, even, urging him not to bring fresh peril on his loved one by remaining beneath the same roof.

"You will—you must, Jim, darling!" Tina earnestly added, reading that hesitation pretty nearly aright. "At least until you are perfectly well again. Think—I must see you every day—every hour, until I know you have perfectly recovered! I must, Jim," with a piteous mingling of resolve and pleading in voice and eyes. "And if you go to a hotel, wouldn't it make even more talk? For I'd haunt your door by night as by day, my poor darling!"

Manlike, Anderson grew frightened at her approach of hysterics, and yielded so far as to promise he would retain his room for the present, and adding what was simply the truth: that if he had hesitated at all, it was because he feared his unknown enemy or enemies might endanger her precious life while making another attempt to take his own.

The poor fellow meant well, but he could hardly have given a more unfortunate reason than this. Tina shivered and moaned, her eyes blinding with tears of terror, not for herself but for what she now knew was far dearer. Those awful minutes when she felt that she was carrying the dead or dying body of her lover, showed her how intensely and entirely she loved the young bridge-boss.

They were almost at a little mountain brook when Tina showed these signs of giving way beneath the awful weight she had carried for the past hour, and Jim proposed that they pause for a bit, feeling that both of them would be all the better for a sup of water and a facial bath. The ponies were checked and hitched, Jim laughing faintly as Tina insisted on helping him alight, begging him to lean his whole weight upon her shoulder.

The cold, sparkling water did them both good. Jim washed his hurt thoroughly and bound it up tightly with a kerchief, slouching his hat to conceal the bandage as much as possible, hoping more than ever to escape arousing curiosity while getting safely to Mother's Kitchen.

They delayed only a short time, for Tina spoke of the two men whom she had met, and neither wished to be overtaken by them. Anderson frowned darkly as Tina mentioned the young stranger who had rescued her from the drunken grasp of Sam Hill. Not that he was jealous—how could he be after having won that delicious confession of love?—but the little he had seen of Leslie Kelso had not favorably impressed him.

Re-entering the buggy the lovers resumed their ride toward town, without having seen or heard aught of the schemers or anybody else, and Long Jim gave a glad ejaculation as, just as the outskirts of the little town was reached, he caught sight of two of his men: Will Busby and Sam Collins, idly strolling along with no important object than to kill time.

He called to them, waving a hand to hold their attention, then hurriedly muttered to his pale-faced companion:

"You will not object to walking a bit, Tina, if I put you under the wing of Will Busby? He can take you to the home without anybody being any the wiser, and Collins can drive me. I'd walk, but—"

"You will come right home, Jim?" imploringly.

"And jolly glad to, little one," was the prompt response. "I'd do the walking, but I'm not quite certain about my legs as yet, and then somebody'd be almost sure to notice this blood," with a frowning look at his spotted linen.

"I'll go—I'll be there almost as soon as you are," hurriedly uttered Tina, drawing down her veil as they drew closer to the two members of the bridge gang.

"What can we do for you, boss?" politely asked Busby, doffing his hat with a respectful bow to the young lady, whose hands still held the reins, then changing color as his keen eyes noted those telltale red stains on the broad bosom of his chief. "You're hurt Jim? Who—"

"Not badly, boys," quickly interrupted Anderson, taking the lines from Tina's hands, speaking and moving quite briskly. "We've had a bit of an accident, but all's well now. Will, please assist Miss Cramer to alight. She wishes you to escort her home. Sam, will you come in here and finger the ribbons the rest of the way?"

He was feeling the effects of the strain he thus imposed upon himself, and though hardly conscious of the fact himself, his ghastly pale

face startled his men. But without a word they complied, and Jim managed to add before starting off:

"Don't ask Miss Cramer to talk too much, Busby. I'll tell you all about it at Mother's Kitchen."

With a sigh of relief at having everything turn out so well, Long Jim sunk back into his corner, uttering not another word, while Collins covered the remaining distance, trying to collect his sadly scattered powers in time to leave the buggy and reach his chamber without attracting attention from the idle or the curious passers-by.

Thanks to his strong will, this was accomplished, and by the time Tina Cramer reached home, Collins was off in quest of a doctor, and Jim Anderson was resting comfortably on his narrow bed.

Tina sent mother and father to lend any assistance the physician might call for, herself longing yet fearing to stand at his side. But she might have spared herself much fears and inward praying, for after a thorough examination the medical man declared that no serious harm was done, and that a good night's rest, with moderate caution for a day or two to come, would bring the patient out in good shape.

When the doctor told Tina as much at the foot of the stairs, where she intercepted him, her trembling thanks sent him away with a grave, half-regretful smile playing about his lips. And yet, as he secretly admitted to himself, if any man living was worthy such a treasure, Long Jim Anderson was that man.

Tina stole up to Jim's room before the hour for supper, to make sure he lacked for naught, and, it may be, to gather strength for filling her accustomed place at the little desk in the restaurant below. She dared not linger long, but when she went away her eyes were brighter and her cheeks were rosier than usual.

As Jim had requested Tina to ask, Josh Cramer himself brought up a daintily arranged and tempting supper for the wounded man, whose bodily powers were rapidly returning to him, and who laughingly protested against being coddled like an overgrown baby. But honest Josh would not be convinced that Jim could wait on himself, and fussily insisted on carving his food for him, and would even have fed him like a baby, had not Anderson laughingly drawn the line right there.

"If it wasn't that my bandaged pate might attract unwelcome curiosity among your guests, I'd go down-stairs as usual," he declared; then adding more soberly: "Will you insist that I'm out of my head, Mr. Cramer, if I tell you that Tina has promised to become my wife, if I can win your and the good mother's consent?"

Josh Cramer started back in dismay, turning white, his eyes protruding, his fat figure shivering curiously as he stared at the speaker in frightened silence. Only for a single breath, however; then he rallied remarkably quick for one of his timid, dependent nature.

"I knew it—I've seen it coming for a long time, sir," he unsteadily pronounced. "Yet—it shakes me all of a heap!"

"Why should it, dear sir?" earnestly asked Anderson. "I know I'm far from deserving such a treasure, but if she is willing to risk it, I trust neither of her parents will stand in our way?"

"I'll do it—I've got to! I must tell you all about it, first!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NEW WRINKLE FOR SOLEMN SAUL.

THE Shades was surrounded by a curious crowd all that bright Sabbath morning, but had to be content with staring at the blank white front, or the dingy, unpainted, weather-beaten sides and rear of the big frame building. The doors were locked, the windows tightly draped on the first floor, and no word could be obtained from any within.

All that was known with anything like certainty, was that the doctors pronounced both Burt and Pap Fouser seriously injured.

Inside, the deformed youth was lying on his bed in a chamber over the spot where he had so boldly faced the gang under lead of Pat McCarthy. Over him hung Pap Fouser, pale and ghastly, looking many years older than he had when that marvelous voice first broke the silence which overhung the gambling hall.

His head was bandaged, though the physician had almost to use force in winning even this scant consideration for his own injury. The livid veins on his temples quivered with each beat of his heart, but the father never even felt the pain which, under ordinary circumstances would have been sufficient to drive him almost mad. His sole thought was how to save his idolized son from the grave into which he seemed so surely sinking.

Solemn Saul, his staff lying across his lap, was squatting near, his long visage the very type of unutterable sadness and melancholy. His little gray eyes divided their attention between the sufferer on the bed, with his feeble, restless moans of pain as he lay under the influence of a sleeping potion, and the silent agony of that dark figure above the hunchback.

"An' him the wu'st off o' the two!" the tramp from Texas was reflecting. "An' him sinkin' heap hurrieder into the yawnin' pit! An' him no more knowin' to it than ef he was a flea clean bu'sted up the back under a thumb-nail! Sufferin' grandpap o' sorer!"

It was a vigil scarcely less wearing to Solemn Saul than it was to the injured father, for he dared not leave the room. Time and again had poor Burt muttered something about the "new snap," or asked in feverish accents for the little joker and the shells to play and see if they couldn't win that horrible pain from about his heart! And in forced composure Solemn Saul would open his staff and go through his melancholy performance, his own eyes nearly blinded by the tears which the really piteous scene drew up from the depths.

Presently the breathing of the deformed grew more natural, and his gasping groans came further apart as the potion fairly took hold. Solemn Saul tried to coax Pap Fouser to lie down and catch a few winks, urging the necessity of his retaining all his bodily powers in case of even worse, but he reasoned to ears that silently refused to hear or heed. The best he could accomplish was to seat the father in a comfortable chair by the couch where all that he loved or cared for in this world was wrestling with grim death.

"It wont take but one hole fer the two on 'em, ef bad luck keeps up its grip like its sot in fer to do!" gloomily reflected the man with the shells, watching the two sorely injured persons from his shaded corner. "An' when that time comes, I'm goin' fer to bu'st my vow all to holy blazes an' hunt up that p'izen critter what sicked Pat McCarthy on fer a fresh start when the pore lad held him dizzy!"

The hours wore wearily on, and great as was his anxiety over the outcome, Solemn Saul, who had lost much sleep of late, fell into a doze as he braced his bowed back in the corner, and this lasted until past the hour of midday.

The sound of voices finally roused him, and he started up so hurriedly that his staff fell clattering to the bare floor. Pap Fouser flashed an angry glance toward him, and Solemn Saul began a muttered apology, only to cut it short with a gasping breath of astonishment.

The fever which almost invariably attends such injuries, was now upon the poor youth, and it was his broken, disjointed speech that had startled the Texan tramp from his doze. But now, without the slightest preliminary, the hunchback began to sing! And though his tones were weakened and at times indistinct, there could be no room for doubt. It was not only the very song which the mystery of The Shades had been delighting its customers with, but the voice was also the same!

Strange, incredible as it seemed, Burt Fouser was the phantom singer whose marvelous voice had so intensely interested the citizens of Quivering Asp!

Pap Fouser was lightly clasping one feverish hand between his palms, watching the flushed face of his only treasure—the fair, unscarred cheek was turned toward him as it touched the white pillow—and hot, scalding tears trickled down his haggard face.

He had been so proud of that voice! It had been such a comfort to him, and had lighted up his pathway in life, so darkly shadowed save for the comfort and happiness which this one treasure gave him: only for his idolized son the dark, stern man would long since have killed himself rather than suffer on as he had suffered for so many years.

Solemn Saul stood like one under a spell until that marvelously sweet voice sunk into silence, the deformed lying on his pillow with a more natural look on his flushed face. It really seemed as though singing had brought his feverish brain relief.

The long breath which Solemn Saul drew at this, attracted the attention of Pap Fouser, who forced a wan smile as he noticed that bewildered, dumfounded look. He gently released the hand of his son, waiting to make sure the change did not disturb the young man, who was apparently dropping off into the most natural and therefore refreshing slumber he had been able to secure since receiving those cruel hurts.

Slowly, silently Pap Fouser rose to his feet and moved away from the bedside, watching and ready to return instantly should a change come over that feverish form. A gesture drew Solemn Saul to the other end of the room, where the proprietor explained the mystery which had done so much for The Shades.

"He trusted and liked you, Sunday," softly breathed Pap Fouser, still watching the wounded hunchback. "I know he wouldn't object to the discovery you have made this day, though he has so jealously guarded his secret for all these years. Dearly as he loved me, it was long before I learned of his marvelous gift; I can only call it that, for you who have heard the poor lad talk, must have noticed how his awful injuries when—how that roughened and made his speech harsh."

"Then it wasn't—then he hain't bin playin'—"

"It is as I tell you. He can speak in no other

tone of voice. It is only while singing that the natural sweetness comes back to his vocal chords. I don't try to explain it. I simply state the fact."

Pap Fouser cut himself short and hurried back to the side of his moaning son, resuming his former position of painful watchfulness, entirely disregarding his own racking tortures.

Though Solemn Saul had been accepted as a nurse, he found his position even worse than a sinecure. He was forced to witness such bodily and mental sufferings, yet without permission to do or say aught to relieve them.

But as the afternoon slowly wasted away, he conceived a bold expedient, and silently stole down to the bar where he found the doctor just admitted by the one man in waiting below. He hurriedly detailed his fears for Pap Fouser in case he should not take rest, and the doctor seemed to fully realize the same necessity, for he called for a bottle of brandy and liberally dosed it with a sleeping potion.

Between them they induced the father to drink a liberal dose, and as the sun sunk to rest that evening, Pap Fouser gradually yielded to the potent draught, and was placed on an improvised pallet not far from the bed on which his son was lying.

"That begins to look a weenty bit more like it!" the tramp from Texas mumbled to himself as he looked from one patient to another. "Ef I hed a hull horsepittle all to my lonesome self fer a few months, I raally reckon I'd begin fer to fergit how monstrous mis'able I be my own ugly self—so I do, boss!"

The physician gave him his final directions, then left Solemn Saul on guard, promising to come in again before going to bed for the night.

With a tenderness hardly to be expected in one of his grade, the man with the shells performed his duties, assiduously watching over the sorely wounded youth, keeping his lips moist, doing all he could to prolong that precious sleep.

It did not last as long as he hoped, however, though Burt could hardly be said to awaken. His restlessness grew, his moans became louder and more frequent, and then broken, disconnected words fell from his fevered lips: words that brought a shade of half-awed pity into that grave, sympathetic if not handsome face.

The poor deformed spoke of love, of a sweet and bewitching face which seemed to haunt his dreams as he hovered on the brink of the grave. And after a while he spoke of singing to her—of silently worshiping at first, then of wooing his angel by the gift of song!

"Wuss an' wuss an' more of it!" gloomily muttered Solemn Saul, as he distinguished the name of Tina Cramer. "Bad 'nough to hev to fight sech hurts, but a bu'sted heart, too! An' yit I kin say I knowed it! I knowed they must be a woman to the bottom o' it all—wuss luck!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DAUGHTER IN LOVE, IF NOT IN LAW.

THOSE words had scarcely passed the lips of Josh Cramer than he appeared to regret the impulse which led up to them, for he snatched up his tray and beat a hasty retreat as the nature of his burden and his natural build would permit.

Long Jim Anderson gazed after him until his short, stubbed figure vanished from view, then lay back on his pillow trying to divine what could be the matter with the fellow?

All at once there came to him a far from agreeable flash of memory. He turned back in mind to that day, just before the treacherous enemy sped his well-nigh fatal shot from ambush. He could see Tina's almost painfully embarrassed face, and he could hear her murmuring deprecatory words which—what *did* they mean?

"It's a lie, and I know it!" Jim angrily grated, his teeth coming together with a sharp click and his strong jaws squaring as he strove to banish that ugly thought.

Despite his utmost efforts he could not forget how wondrously like unto the sweet voice of his betrothed was that of the hidden singer whose repute served to draw and hold so much custom for The Shades of recent months!

He did not, would not believe that his Tina could be the same, for though the musical mystery had never, so far as rumor had it, been seen to enter or quit the place, while no person had ever ventured to connect her name with the mystery, he felt that by so doing he would be degrading his high ideal, his love, his Tina.

Yet, if it wasn't something of the sort which Josh Cramer had to confess, why was his agitation so strong when he was asked for the gift of his daughter's hand by one whom he must long since have known as a suitor who surely would put forward some such claim in time? And why had Josh Cramer beaten such a ridiculous retreat, unless it was that he had some disagreeable admission to make, some unpleasant story to tell?

Fortunately for the state of his brain, perhaps, Jim Anderson was not left long alone with his uncomfortable thoughts and fears, and despite his natural misgivings, the bridge-boss smiled gladly as he caught sight of Sally Cramer returning in place of the worthy but weak-nerved Josh.

"It's like a cup of cold water in a desert, Mrs.

Cramer, just to catch a glimpse of your face," he cried, more than half in earnest, too.

For if Sally Cramer was a bit strong-minded and hot-tempered at odd spells, she showed naught of the virago in her face. That was of a strong yet comely type, and there were those frequenting Mother's Kitchen who claimed an ability to draw a strong resemblance between mother and daughter, Sally and Tina.

"You have been frightening poor Josh Cramer clean out of his wits, Jimmy," half-laughingly, half-seriously uttered the woman as she dropped into a chair near the bed on which the bridge-boss now occupied a sitting position.

"I'm very sorry, Mother Sally, but—shall I scare you in the same manner?" forcing a half-smile as he spoke. "Would you take the broom to me if I said I wanted you and Josh to give me your greatest treasure?"

"Meaning just exactly what, Jimmy?" slowly asked the woman, her comely face now turned entirely grave and thoughtful.

"What but Tina, mother?" and Anderson would have left his bed to take her hand and plead more at length, only for a quick gesture that restrained him, and a sentence that almost stunned him, brain and body.

"You think Tina is my own child, but she isn't anything of the sort, Jimmy!"

Anderson stared in stupid amazement and doubt, unable to believe the evidence of his own senses. Tina not Tina? Not the daughter of Sally Cramer? Then—who and what was she?

"It's just that my poor, silly man meant, Mr. Anderson, when he broke out and said he'd got to tell you the whole story," added Sally, her voice as grave as her face, and showing that his recoil had hurt her feelings just a little bit by bestowing a title upon him instead of her motherly "Jimmy." "And if you really want to marry Tina—"

"If?" echoed the bridge-boss, his face quickly flushing. "Mrs. Cramer, you must know that I have no hope a thousandth part as dear! You must have seen how wholly and devotedly I have loved your daughter ever since the day on which we first met! You must—"

Sally smiled brightly if briefly, leaning forward far enough to tap those impetuous lips with her motherly palm, interrupting him:

"It does my poor heart good to hear you talk so brave, Jimmy, but you mustn't say too much before you know just what and where Tina—Heaven's brightest blessings rest on her dear head!"

"Amen and amen to that!" heartily cried Anderson, adding impulsively: "I don't need to listen, Mrs. Cramer. I don't care to hear anything further than that you and your husband give me permission to take Tina as a wife. I want her. I don't care what the past may hold concealed within its archives, so long as Tina marries me!"

Sally half-deserted her seat, and for a moment it seemed as though she was about to fling her still plump and comely arms about the neck of the speaker; but she refrained, though she turned toward the door and with a laugh that had in it just a touch of hysterics, cried out:

"Josh—you Josh! Come right in, or you'll be scandalized by seeing the wife of your bosom hugging and kissing another man!"

"If you'd really like to do it, Sarah, I'm sure I've no mighty objections," stammered Josh, creeping into the room even more meekly than was customary, casting frightened glances from wife to proposed son-in-law, as though he could not tell which one he dreaded most just then.

"When you see a good thing, jump right at it!" laughed Anderson, as he actually performed what Sally had merely mentioned. "Now, Mr. Cramer, I'm ready for your hot shot and carving-knives! Grim death has no terrors for me now, since I've tasted of all earthly delights!"

"Sally—Sarah!" faltered poor Josh, the picture of miserable suspense. "Does he know? Have you told him yet?"

"All that I care to hear before the words: 'Take her and may you never prove unworthy the precious gift!'" earnestly interjected Jim.

"You mean every word of it, too, you dear honey!" and there were signs of tears in Sally's voice and eyes as she struggled to regain her composure. "I'll say 'em with joy, but first—you must listen to how we came to take dear Tina to our hearts and home."

Anderson offered no further objection. Why should he? He felt confident that all would be well in the end, and while waiting for such a priceless gift from the hands of this honest couple, how could he deny them such a trifle?

Josh retreated into the background, of course, leaving his wife to do the talking, simply interjecting a word or a groan here and there, by way of emphasis.

There was a partial likeness between this recital and the story told by Selby Haslam to his client, Leslie Kelso, the last having been placed before the reader. But the further Sally went on, the less this likeness grew, until it could hardly be the same characters were the ones more deeply interested.

And yet Sally told of a poor and wretched family named Dew. She spoke of a midnight

conflagration and a midnight tragedy. But then the resemblance began to grow less and less distinct.

"It was a bitter hard winter for poor folk, was that," she said, her eyes bent on her hands as they lay in her lap, nervously picking at and twisting the strings of her generous apron. "It fattened the graveyards, as the old saying goes, and—and we were forced to give our share."

Josh groaned hollowly, shrinking deeper into the shadows.

"We had only the one child, Mr. Anderson," bravely resumed Sally, though there were traces of tears in face and voice, despite her brave efforts to keep down that rising memory of dark and mournful days. "She was the light of our life, and that sweet and bright and darling—though you may think that I'm only a doting mother who—"

"Haven't I seen her? Haven't I fallen in love with her? Don't I know how far ahead and above all others the precious girl is?" softly uttered Long Jim, devoutly believing every word he spoke, too!

"You mean Tina? She is all that, Jimmy, but I was talking of our own little girl," added Sally, gradually recovering her composure and with a quick gesture preventing the bridge-boss from renewing his interruption. "You keep forgetting, Jimmy, but you'll come to understand in time that Tina isn't *really* our daughter beyond adoption, though we couldn't love her one mite the better—could we, Josh?"

"Not a mite, Sally!" was the prompt response from the corner.

"We used to live in the same house with the Dews, and their girl and our child were famous good friends, playing together all the time they possibly could. They were almost the same age—only a few weeks' difference between them—and almost of a size. And they were that much alike in the face that many a one not a mother could hardly tell t'other from which!"

"We left that house two months and more before the fire, but Tina was often stealing out to play with our Gracie, and so—well, we come to love the dear child almost like our own, even before death took our own treasure away, all in a night, one might say!"

"Don't, Sally, unless you just *have* to!" groaned poor Josh.

"And then God sent you another treasure?" softly breathed Jim.

"He sent us Tina, and we haven't got over thanking Him for doing it to this blessed day!" declared Sally, smiling through her tears.

She went on to tell the story of that black tragedy, something in the same manner as detailed by Selby Haslam, but while apparently dealing with the same persons, there was a material difference in the two accounts.

Sally told how, late one night, as she arose from bed to see where the fire could be for which the alarm was sounding: striking the number of their own crowded district, too: she heard a faint, frightened voice calling to her dead and buried Gracie, just beneath her window.

"And there I found the poor little creature, half dead with cold—for it was an awful storm, the night! And I took her in, meaning to carry her home to her poor mother in the morning, never dreaming that even at that moment the suffering creature was at rest and her soul on its way to glory—no I never!"

Overcome by her own powers of narration, Sally paused long enough to shed a tear or two of heartfelt sympathy for the martyred woman, whose place as mother she had herself so generously filled ever since that bitter black night of years gone by.

Jim Anderson listened in grave silence. He cared little for all that, for no matter what might be the parentage of Tina, he loved her for her own dear self alone. But he would not check Sally, since she was so plainly making a treat out of her own pains.

Mrs. Cramer told how, the first thing in the morning, she learned of the awful discovery made by the man who had carried the body of Mrs. Dew out of the burning building. It "knocked her all of a heap," and she hardly knew what was the proper course for her to pursue. And to still further complicate matters, little Tina was suddenly taken down with a raging fever, no doubt the result of her long exposure to the bitter storm of that sad night.

"For two long weeks I stood over the precious pet, night and day, fighting for her life. For fully one month I couldn't dare believe that we would cheat old death in the end. And then—I just *couldn't* help it sir!" with sudden passion in her tones. "She looked at me with my lost Gracie's eyes! She called me mammy—the little lamb!"

With a choking howl of too great emotion, Josh Cramer left his shady corner and fairly rolled out of the chamber, unable to endure more.

Never heeding him, Mrs. Cramer went on to tell of the temptation to keep the poor child—now worse than orphaned. She concealed nothing, even as to her fears of Digby Dew, whose hands were red with the blood of his murdered wife.

"It makes no difference: I love her, and I'll make her my wife!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CRYING FOR THE MOON.

ACCORDING to the belief of the doctor who attended Burt Fouser, that Sabbath night bade fair to be most important. By the time it came to an end, though, he would be able to pronounce with some certainty as to the chance for life or death.

Knowing this, Solemn Saul never closed an eye in even a doze that long night, faithfully carrying out the instructions given him. Had the wounded youth been his own son, he could have done nothing more.

Pap Fouser slept until well along in the night, when he roused up, and despite the pleadings of the tramp from Texas, resumed his place by the side of his injured son.

With the breaking of dawn, the hunchback rested a little more naturally, and Solemn Saul ventured to whisper hope into the ear of that ghastly pale man, hoping thus to lead him into taking more thought for his alarming condition. But his words were wasted, so far as that hope was concerned. Pap Fouser smiled wanly but gratefully in return for his words, but silently refused to yield his place, even long enough to eat a morsel of food.

It was a strange, unnatural disposition, after all. Though his passionate love was visible through all, it seemed as though the man was doing penance for some awful crime or wrong of the hidden past.

As the sun rose higher, sending a subdued light through the white-curtained windows into the sick chamber, Burt seemed to rally, and when his eyes opened it was to recognize his father for the first time since his wounding.

Pap Fouser could not reply in words to that faint, languid greeting, but his feverish lips touched that terribly scarred cheek, and the deformed shrunk slightly away as two tears seemed to scorch his flesh.

"Most ready fer to git up an' hev a turrible wrastle with the little joker, boss?" asked Solemn Saul as he came forward with the medicine which, according to orders, he was to give with the first signs of awaking.

Burt quietly took the dose, but there was a vaguely puzzled look in his single eye as it rested on that gaunt, pale countenance. And the man with the shells drew back with a smothered sigh as he saw that the hunchback's brain was still clouded.

He stole out of the room to send the man on duty below after the doctor, then hastened back to his station. And Pap Fouser himself could hardly have awaited with greater interest the verdict of the physician.

It was, on the whole, about as favorable as he had dared hope for. There was rather more than a fighting chance for life, but all depended on keeping the patient quiet and as free from disturbing thoughts and scenes as possible.

Words so easy to utter, but so hard to carry out!

As the morning wore on, that terrible fever seemed to come back by degrees, though far less intense than it had been on the day and night last past. Only at intervals did the wounded young man actually rave, though Solemn Saul seriously doubted whether he was ever entirely lucid, even when he spoke most connectedly. Through all there was such shivering restlessness. Such bright, even wild light in his one eye.

At one time he seemed to fully recognize the tramp from Texas, and with something of animation in his voice, asked Solemn Saul to produce his implements and make the little joker go through his evolutions. But though the Sad Man from San Saba promptly complied, moving with noiseless celerity, the deformed scarcely gave the performance a second look, resuming his old restless movements with his head, broken mutterings passed his lips.

Sighing softly Solemn Saul crept back to his corner, silently closing and laying aside his staff, with a sad, reproachful look at the shells and the little black ball before slipping them into his pocket. It was as though he blamed them for failing to interest the wounded youth.

It was not a position to be envied, this one which Solemn Saul had so earnestly sought, for it was sad enough watching the pitiful devotion of that ghastly pale man, himself only kept from bed by his unutterable love for his son, tinged as it was with an undying remorse.

"The same hole—do fer 'em both!" mechanically groaned Sunday.

Shortly after this Burt Fouser seemed to gain strength, both of voice and body. He insisted on being propped up a bit with pillows, and when this was done he lay with closed eye and motionless lips, his head gently clasped between the feverish palms of his father the while.

"Father," he uttered, with a suddenness that caused the parent to start. "Does she know? Has anybody told her that?"

He stopped short, with a passing frown as of impatience with himself. Pap Fouser murmured something, he hardly knew himself, but Burt apparently neither heard nor heeded.

He began talking to himself: it could hardly be called raving, his tones were so gentle, so sad, rather than wild and incoherent.

"She don't know—she'll never know, now!

Time was—but I was crazy and worse, even to think of such a thing in my dreams! *She*—so charming, so beautiful, so pure and innocent! *I*—what am I! The devil's own! And here is his brand!"

With a finger he sharply tapped his scarred cheek and probed the empty socket in which his eye had once shone, laughing harshly, bitterly the while.

Pap Fouser sunk on his knees beside the bed, hiding his face in the covers, making no sound though Solemn Saul could see how violently he shivered in every fiber.

"It's killin' him! An' the hand he loves so well is driving the knife through and through his heart!" he muttered, brushing the cold sweat from his brows with a trembling hand.

But he dared not interfere. That grief of remorse was too great. Pap Fouser would only repulse him, anyway.

"I dared not tell her—my beautiful angel!" again muttered the injured youth. "I would have given all the rest of my wretched life, for just one minute of love—for one smile of bright affection from her red lips. But—I could only flee for shame whenever I caught her looking toward me—*me*, so horrible, so frightfully deformed.

"If I could only—if she only knew! It was all I could boast of. My gift of song. And—I wonder if she was pleased? Did she know it was all meant for *her*? Could she tell—and I—I dared not let her see even the fair side of my face! It would show through—it would make her shrink away and faint with disgust!"

Again he was silent for a spell, seemingly unconscious of all surrounding objects. And still Pap Fouser knelt there with hidden face, suffering tortures worse than those visited upon the damned!

"Father?"

Pap Fouser instantly lifted his head, trying to hide the awful havoc his hurts and his mental wounds had wrought in his face. He even forced a smile—so ghastly and unnatural that Solemn Saul shivered and closed his eyes to shut it out—as he whispered his son's name, asking what he could do for him.

Burt turned his head until he could gaze fairly into the face of his parent, but even then he failed to take note of that terrible alteration wrought in such a brief space. His tones were more even, his sentences more connected, than at any time since his hurts; but through it all ran a certain subdued wildness that only too plainly betrayed the unsettled brain.

"Father, I want you do something for me. I want you—I am pretty sure to die, don't you think, father?"

"No, my boy," hoarsely. "You sha'n't die! I'll never let you die! What would become of me if—the doctor says that with proper care, he thinks we'll pull you through, my son."

Slowly, painfully, came these last words. Pap Fouser realized that his fierce, pitiful denial of what he so sorely feared, must injure by exciting his son, and his love was intense enough to enable him to win even such a victory over himself.

"The doctor lies, father," with a half-laugh. "I'm booked, and we both know it. After all, why should we be sorry? I'm not such a beauty—and then—father, will you do something for me?"

"I'd suffer the worst torments of hell a million years just to please you in the slightest trifle, my only treasure!"

"I've been an awful fool, father," still without seeming to note what was said in reply. "I've been silly enough to fall over head and ears in love with—you know her, father? You think that *she* would come to me, just for a minute, maybe—if she knew I was dying?"

"Who is it, son?" Pap Fouser forced himself to ask.

"If it could only be—if I could see her shed even a single tear—not that!" with sharp impatience, as though the words had issued from other than his own lips. "Why should I make her cry? Tears and sorrow are not fitting for—father, why don't you answer me?"

"I am—I do, dear boy. Who do you want to see?"

"Ain't it the little gal at Mother's Kitchen? Ain't it Tina Cramer?"

"Tina—my little daisy dipped in dew!" softly murmured the boy, a peaceful smile irradiating his unscarred brow and cheek.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRONG MAN'S AGONY.

WITH those words upon his lips, Burt Fouser sunk into what proved to be the most natural sleep he had yet been blessed with.

Shortly afterward the doctor came and took to himself and his advice all the credit, as was but natural, perhaps. As neither Pap Fouser nor Solemn Saul ventured to correct him, his mistake was perfectly legitimate.

But just as Solemn Saul began to hope he could prevail upon Pap Fouser to lie down and rest, Burt once more began his worse than raving—worse because he seemed so thoroughly sane in all save his impossible longings for the unattainable, that one could not help trying to reason with him.

Thus it was that another day dawned, with Pap Fouser still on watch by the side of his unfortunate son, though Solemn Saul groaned inwardly as he saw how terribly the man had altered for the worse.

"The same hole—an' of the boy don't look mighty sharp, he'll hev to fetch up the tail too!" dolefully predicted the man with the shells, himself looking haggard and worn with long vigils.

It was quite early in the day when Burt Fouser sunk into another heavy sleep, and when convinced of this, his father painfully rose to his feet and motioned Solemn Saul to follow him outside the room.

"Watch over him, good friend. Don't let him miss me if he should waken before I return. I'm going—to buy what he wants, if pity and humanity won't grant it without."

Sunday appeared thoroughly bewildered. He had thought nothing short of death itself could tear the father from his son's couch, yet here was a voluntary exile—and for what?

He had no time given him for asking questions, for the weakened, bowed figure of the recently strong, hale man was already beginning the descent of the narrow stairs, supporting himself by the wall.

"You've got to take a bite an' eat a sup afore you mosey a single durn step, boss!" almost sharply uttered Sunday, following after and lending the support of his muscular arm. "Sufferin' grandpap o' weakness an' starvation an' fever! You'd crumple all in a heap ef you was to try to cross the fu'st street an'—It's eat an' drink fu'st, or crawl all up the back o' me next, boss!"

Pap Fouser was too weak, too nearly broken down in mind and body to resist this kindly roughness, and Solemn Saul refused to leave him until, at the bar, he saw him forcing down a couple of crackers dipped in brandy. Then, cautioning the barkeeper to bear Fouser company where he wished to go, and to see him safely back again, Solemn Saul hurried back to resume his post beside poor Burt Fouser.

More than once persons were met who had to look twice before they could recognize the sadly altered man, but he never paused to answer their greetings or their questions. He kept moving, nerved by the little nourishment he had been forced to take, until he reached Mother's Kitchen.

At that hour of the day the restaurant proper was free from guests and only fat, comfortable Josh Cramer sat nodding placidly at the desk which Tina occupied during business hours, as a rule.

"You have a daughter named Tina?" huskily asked Pap Fouser, without preface. "Can I see her? It is a matter of life or death, man!"

Timid Josh was frightened by that wild if faint violence, and he actually beat a retreat without more than an inarticulate murmur, in which the single word "Sally" could be distinguished.

Pap Fouser shook off the supporting hand which his employee lent, and signing him to wait his return, followed hard on the steps of the retreating proprietor, pausing at the threshold of the kitchen just as Cramer gaspingly explained to Sally his narrow escape from a lunatic.

Tina was with her adopted mother, both engaged in pastry work, and she uttered a little cry of affright as she turned to behold that haggard face, those feverishly brilliant eyes.

"You are Tina?" huskily muttered Fouser, trying to steady himself by a hand on the casing. "Have pity—show mercy to my poor boy! You cannot save his life—he is dying, even now!—but you can help me to make that death more easy! In the name of God I beg—"

His voice choked and he swayed dizzily for a brief space, then sunk down in a limp and nerveless heap like one suddenly paralyzed.

"It's the crazy mad!" gasped Josh, trying to hide behind the ample skirts of his better-half.

"He ain't crazy, whatever else," Sally asserted, and tearing away from her timid husband, she knelt beside the poor wretch, lifting his head to her lap and loosening the collar about his throat as she said:

"Bottle, Josh! Don't be a bigger idiot than—"

It was Tina who brought the desired stimulant, and between them they managed to pour a small quantity down Fouser's throat.

The brandy acted quickly on an almost empty stomach, and Fouser feebly struggled to rise, sinking again into the chair which Sally deftly placed for him. And it shows something how utterly he was bound up in his deformed son, when he gave no word of thanks for their kindness. Indeed he seemed only conscious of Tina's presence, his hollow eyes fixed pleadingly upon her half-frightened face, his tones husky and trembling, even more through emotion than with physical weakness.

"If you could see and hear him—my poor, dying boy! If you only knew how—how piteously he keeps calling—how he moans and—dying, and I unable to help him! I, who would die ten million deaths to save him from a single pang of pain!"

Tina shrunk back, frightened, and Josh stole tremblingly away to beg Long Jim Anderson to come down and preserve them all from being massacred by a raging lunatic!

More than half crazed though he was, Pap Fouser saw that his unrestrained grief and despair was injuring even what faint hopes he might otherwise have of success, and with a desperate effort he temporarily regained his self-control, speaking slowly, deliberately, as if he had to search for each word before finding it.

"My name is Fouser. I have a son, whose name is Burt. I am a gambler, and I run the place known as The Shades. I have made money, and I can draw my check for an even hundred thousand, without cleaning out my bank account. I call it mine, but I lie. It is all his—all for my poor boy! And I'll give it every dollar to you, dear girl, if you—"

"What does this fellow want, Tina?" sternly demanded Anderson, coming into the kitchen, his face stern-set, his eyes glowing dangerously.

"To save the life of my boy! If you could only hear him—if you could see how sweetly he smiles as he calls your name—and when he sings the songs he used to sing to you in the dark nights, where he could hide his poor scarred face and deformed back—"

Tina caught the arm of her lover, trembling like a leaf, yet not ready to stand by and see Jim use the force he meditated, thinking it a case of maudlin drunkenness, for the moment forgetting all he had heard about the serious injury the saloonkeeper had received.

"Will you step outside and tell me just what you want, Mr. Fouser?"

But the poor wretch had eyes and ears only for Tina. He could entertain no other thought but how he could win her over to his insane hope of still wresting his idolized son from the grip of death.

"I am rich, dear girl," he eagerly uttered, his eyes fairly blazing with mingled hope and fears. "I will give it all to you if you will try to save my poor boy!"

"If I can do anything—" faltered Tina.

"You can—if you only will!" rising to his feet and faintly resisting the strong arm with which Anderson barred his way. "Not save his life—I know he is doomed to death—but smooth his dying pillow—make blessed his last moments on— You will? Say you will yield to my prayer—to his wishes! Say that you will give him the right to have you by his side for the little time a cruel fate will grant him to me! And I—I would suffer eternity in the deepest pit of hell to give him a single hour of life—of peace and happiness!"

The miserable wretch bowed his head and covered his face with his hands, hot tears trickling through his trembling fingers and spotting the clean floor. And even Jim Anderson felt great pity for him.

"You will—you will grant my poor boy one hour of perfect bliss?" again appealed Pap Fouser, rallying from his weakness. "It will not last long. It ought not to be so hard. And I'll give you every dollar I own in the wide world as his widow. Say you will marry him?"

Tina shrunk back with a faint cry of mingling fear, wonder and indignation at this strange, unreasonable appeal. But she still clung to the arm of her betrothed and kept him from striking that madman in his hot indignation at such an abominable proposition.

"I cannot—you are surely mad to even think of such a thing!" she said, her face flushing and paling in swift succession.

Pap Fouser stood gazing dizzily into her face for a few moments, then reeled back to fall into his chair, hiding his face and moaning:

"Not even that! Unable to even light up his dying moments! And—I did it all! I scarred his poor face! I crooked his poor back! I made his whole life a curse! And—God pity us both!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT.

It was a painful scene, even for those who naturally had the least interest in the matter. Even Jim Anderson looked less stern, though his arm kept Tina close to his side; while Sally tried her best to lend the sorely afflicted man comfort.

She did succeed in calming him a little, mainly by low, soft words concerning his son. He should try to be strong and brave and composed for the sake of his loved one. If the poor boy was lying so low, all the more reason why he, his father, should smother his own emotions until the crisis was past, be that for good or for evil.

And at last Pap Fouser uncovered his haggard face, plainer than ever marked by the finger of grim death. He tried to force a smile as he gazed wistfully toward Tina, but it was hardly a success.

"I can see now that I was worse than mad to hold such a wild hope, Miss Cramer," he said, the words coming painfully but with more steadiness than might have been expected. "I could think only of him—my poor, dying boy! If you could hear him—"

Again he choked, and was forced to avert his face for a moment. During that brief interval Tina and Sally interchanged glances. Sally nodded vigorously, and before Jim could realize

what was going on, the maiden slipped from his arm and knelt beside the wretched father.

"It was unreasonable, dear sir, but I am willing to do all I can," she said, bravely fighting back the tremor in her voice. "If you think my presence—as a friend, or a sister—"

Pap Fouser gazed into her charming face for an instant, catching his breath painfully as he strove to speak. He could not. And then his pitiful efforts at composure gave way, and he sobbed like a little child whose heart is nearly broken.

Nor were his the only damp eyes in that kitchen. Even Jim had to wink fast and furiously, while poor Josh sunk down in a corner and blubbered outright—bless his honest old heart!

Sally flirted her ample apron at all the rest, as though she was shoeing chickens, and only too glad of the fair excuse, Anderson drew his betrothed out of the room, to reason and expostulate with her on the rash promise she had partly given. He told her what and who this man and his son really was. He told her of The Shades where they lived, and how no woman, so far as known, had ever crossed the threshold since the building was erected.

But Tina, through her tears, told him how often she had been wakened in the dead of night by that marvelously sweet voice beneath her window. Told him how the heart-broken father had begged her to at least try to comfort the death-hours of his poor boy. And though she admitted freely enough that she dreaded the ordeal, she would not promise even her lover to refrain from visiting the dying youth.

Meanwhile Sally Cramer was doing her best to make Pap Fouser understand how matters stood, and urging him to make the best of it. If he really thought it would benefit his son, or give him a crumb of comfort to see Tina beside him a little while, she was quite willing to take her child there.

But there must be no more of this wild talk about marrying, and about money. If Tina visited the sick, it was to be understood by all, and no one more particularly than the wounded youth himself, that she came simply as a friend and well-wisher might.

Half-crazed though he undoubtedly was, Pap Fouser was sane enough to see that he could hope to win no greater concession than this, and he gladly, gratefully accepted the boon. He would go on in advance to prepare his poor son for the coming visit.

Sally would not permit him to start until after he had eaten a few bites and swallowed a little brandy, for she could see how terribly the poor fellow was broken up. Meekly Pap Fouser submitted, then left Mother's Kitchen in company with his barkeeper, hurrying back home as rapidly as his failing powers would permit.

Sally had a hard battle with Jim Anderson, who declared that he would not permit Tina to visit the sick room without he could keep her company, but strong as was his will, Jim found that he could make no impression on Sally Cramer.

"I'll go with Tina," she declared. "If you will do it, you can go as far as the door; but not a step further—so there!"

With that Jim was forced to content himself, though with anything but a good grace. Not that he was jealous. He would have laughed any such charge to scorn. But—he frowned afresh as he thought of that hideous hunchback serenading the woman whom he was about to marry.

Solemn Saul, looking as though in sore need of a fresh suit and a bath, to say nothing of rest, opened the door of The Shades to admit them, nodding sadly to the bridge-boss, but making no effort to prevent Sally Cramer's closing the door bluntly in Jim's face.

"You can wait, if you feel like it, Jimmy!" she called through the keyhole, when the barrier was made secure. "But I'm man enough to see Tina safely home, and maybe you might put in the time to better advantage!"

Almost any other guide might have grinned a little at this, but Solemn Saul proved his right to his title, groaning most dolefully as he led the way through saloon and gaming-room to the flight of stairs at the rear of the building. And as Sally, just a little depressed by those lugubrious sounds, in a whisper asked him how the poor young man was getting along, he mournfully made reply:

"Never a bit, he ain't! 'Less it's gittin' 'long nighder the golden sta'rs which lead up to glory amen! It'd make a cast-iron monkey cry the two eyes out o' its head, jest to lis'n to the pore crazy critter go on—an' him with angel on one side, an' devil on t'other! That's his face, mum," hastily amending as the women visibly shrunk back, showing signs of reluctance to proceed. "Jes' the outside shell, mum, an' you, miss. Inside I reckon he's as nigh all angel as common critters ever git to be in this weary wale o' sin an' sorer an' trial, an' ef you don't mind, mum an' miss, this yer's the top o' the steps."

Solemn Saul left them standing on the dimly lighted landing while he tip-toed toward the door of the sick chamber; but the precaution

was needless. Pap Fouser was on the alert, and silently appeared, a wan but oh! so grateful smile flickering over his haggard face as he silently welcomed their coming.

He took Tina by the hand, his own so feverish, so trembling, so thin and wasted in that short space—short as usually counted, but an eternity when measured by his sufferings. He gazed appealingly into her frightened eyes, then brokenly begged her to be brave, yet kind.

"He is waiting, and he knows you are coming, dear Miss Cramer. He was so glad when I told him—so grateful—"

His voice choked, and he moved backward still holding the maiden by the hand, leading her into the sick chamber, with Sally following. Tina gave a low, involuntary cry of relieved surprise as her gaze rested upon that motionless form and face. It was so entirely different from what she had been led to expect!

The crooked body was disguised by the neatly arranged bedclothes. The young man was propped up in bed by means of soft pillows, until he was in a half reclining, half sitting position, the kindly supports at the same time entirely concealing his crooked shoulders.

His head was bandaged with white cloths, the folds so arranged as to completely veil his eyeless socket and his hideously scarred and contorted cheek, leaving only the unmarred half open to view. And as that was slightly flushed, with his one eye sparkling brilliantly, his natural beauty was even enhanced by his cunning disguises.

Truly Solemn Saul had not spoken without fair excuse: this was indeed the "face of an angel," in outward resemblance, at least.

And when Burt Fouser gave them greeting, he did not attempt to speak: his voice when thus exercised was far too harsh and repulsive for the ears of the maiden whom he so madly, insanely worshiped. Instead, he sung his greeting! Low, sweet, full of a melancholy gratitude.

Impulsively Tina advanced to the bedside and bending over that softly flushed face, dropped a light kiss upon his smooth brow.

"As poor recognition—as thanks for the many sweet songs you have sung for me, Mr. Fouser!"

Pap Fouser was tremblingly watching the effect which this visit might have on his son, but at this generous, sisterly action, his emotions overcame him, and he blindly turned away, his outstretched hands groping for the door.

Solemn Saul caught them between his own long hands, drawing the sadly broken man from the room, closing the door silently behind them.

"Sufferin' grandpap o' celestial misery mixed all up with angeliferous delight!" the tramp from Texas exploded barely above his breath when at a little distance from the door. "Ef I even run up ag'inst the likes o' that fer pure heavenly pity an' sympathy, I'll eat the own head o' me an' holler fer more on top o' it!"

"Heaven reward her as she deserves!" brokenly sobbed the poor gambler, dropping down upon a chair and burying his face in his hands.

"I love him a million times more than she does, yet I never was able to call such a look of perfect happiness to his face!"

"What's the reason you didn't?" half indignantly retorted Solemn Saul. "Didn't you go fetch the gal here? An' didn't I jest know she wouldn't never come, nohow? An' didn't she? An' wasn't it all your doin's, I want to know?"

But Pap Fouser gave no signs of hearing or comprehension. He felt that his son was dying, and that he could not bear to stand by even to catch his last breath, knowing and seeing that his happiness came from a stranger, not from him.

Solemn Saul could not understand this, strong and genuine though his sympathies were. He thought Pap Fouser was simply grieving over the nearly hopeless condition of his son, and on that hypothesis he did the best he could to comfort and cheer up his patron.

Gradually Pap Fouser grew more composed, more because his tear-ducts were drained dry than from any words of comfort administered by the man with the shells, though Solemn Saul apparently took credit to himself for his well-selected arguments.

At intervals they could catch a low, inexpressible sweet if sad strain, and each time it came to them, Pap Fouser shivered and turned paler, as though he feared it was his son's farewell to this world.

But his fears on this point were groundless, as it was quickly to be made manifest. For Sally Cramer opened the door, her face marked with tears, but wearing a bright smile as she beckoned for them to come.

"He's asked for you, Mr. Fouser," she took time to whisper before admitting even him to the chamber. "He's brightened up wonderfully even in this little time, and if he don't get a back-set, I'm almost ready to declare that he'll get over it, after all!"

This news was so different from what he expected, that Pap Fouser staggered blindly, saved from falling only by the ready grasp of Solemn Saul, who hastily muttered in his ear:

"Sorrowin' Jemima Jane to thunder, boss! Brace up an' help me holler out ge-lory to the ram! Didn't you hear what the missus said?"

Gittin' better! Goin' fer to make a live o' it, an' we—ef I only hed plenty o' bigness fer to jest turn myself outside in an' contrairiwise fer ten seconds an' a— I say, mum, you ain't funnin', be ye?" with an abrupt change of face and voice, as though he realized this news was entirely too good to be true.

"It's gospel truth," nodded Sally, relieving him of his charge and adding with a half-frown: "You'd better go where you can blow off your extra steam—this isn't any place for it!"

She led Pap Fouser into the room, closing the door in the blank face of the Sad Man from San Saba.

"Father!" sung Burt, his face fairly glowing with pleasure, tinged though it was with sadness underlying. "I am no longer crazy. I have met my angel, and she has promised to be a sister unto me! Thank her!"

With a sobbing cry, Pap Fouser fell to his knees before Tina Cramer, pressing the folds of her dress to his parched lips.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SCHEMERS IN COUNCIL.

It was the same evening on which Tina Cramer called on Burt Fouser at The Shades, that Selby Haslam sat in his little office, blandly smiling across his little table into the flushed face of a caller.

"Do you know, my dear Samuel," he softly purred, his foxy eyes partly in ambush under his bushy brows. "I hardly dared hope that you were still breathing the delicious atmosphere of Quivering Asp! I was sadly afraid I would be compelled to look out for another good friend to help me find a way through this little tangle—I did, really!"

Sam Hill, looking rusty and considerably the worse for wear, both in habit and in person, gave a sulky sound which might be either a grunt or a groan, but which was far more likely an oath.

"I am more than delighted to find that I was wrong in my impressions, Samuel," smoothly added the lawyer, an almost angelic smile playing about his sensual lips. "Yet—you are positive you are not endangering your precious life by lingering here? For urgently as I need your friendly services, I would ten thousand times dispense with them than be the cause, however remote, of your premature demise, either by a shot from ambush or a hasty flight up a tree!"

"You're holding something under cover; what is it?" growled Hill.

"Do you know, Samuel, there are really lovely walks among the roads and hills over yonder?" with a slight inclination of his head toward the point of the compass where Tina and Long Jim had so narrowly escaped death on the preceding day. "I ought to know, since with my young friend, Kelso, I spent the better part of the Sabbath exploring that delightful region. But—is there anything in the light which hinders fine shooting, Samuel?"

The tall gambler visibly started, but made no immediate response. When he did speak, it was in low, harsh tones:

"You're trying to mean something, of course, but I reckon you're trying the rig on the wrong man. I don't *sabe*, nor do I care to try."

Selby Haslam laughed softly, his eyes sparkling vividly. After all, why should he waste time in beating about the bush? He knew that Sam Hill had discharged the shot which so nearly put an end to the life-journey of the young bridge-boss, just as well as though he had witnessed the flash and heard the explosion. And knowing this, he felt that he held the tall gambler helplessly beneath his thumb.

"Better luck next time, Samuel, dear boy," he laughed. "May your finger, eye and gun work together in perfect accord when next you attempt to create a vacancy in the bridge service!"

"I don't know what you're trying to get through you, boss," frowned the gambler, but with down-drooping eyes as though unable to meet that keen yet bland inspection. "I've tried to shoot nobody, unless it was while drunk or asleep. You're barking on the wrong trail if you even try to think that way."

"Never mind—let it pass, Samuel. It was a miserable failure, after all, and few of us relish having such botch-work flung back in our faces. What I wanted more particularly was to ask you what decision did you arrive at in that little matter of which we talked—"

"About the girl, of course?" interposed Hill, seemingly no little relieved at having the subject changed.

Selby Haslam nodded assent.

"You want her—removed?"

"I want her put out of the way—for a certain length of time, at least," replied Haslam, imitating the peculiar break which Sam Hill introduced into his question.

The two men gazed into each other's eyes, and during those few moments more was said than by their lips. That interchange of looks told of a hideous crime to come, if all was carried out.

"It will be a little more risky than if there hadn't anything—if that infernal bridge-boss

hadn't taken a lay-off," muttered Hill, hastily amending his first thought, flushing hotly as his covert look was intercepted by the lawyer.

"Which is why I am sorry that little accident happened—or that it wasn't more completely successful," nodded Haslam. "Not that I've any particular grudge against Jim Anderson, you understand, but because he promises to be quite an obstacle in the road. And, after all, a good lawyer can think only how he can best serve the interests of his clients, you know, Samuel!"

"He's a keen, sharp hitter, that same client of yours!" scowled Hill, mechanically fingering his still sore and discolored jaw. "But I don't hold him any particular grudge. I'd ask no better snap than he tumbled into, right then and there. I wonder how much he'd pay me to switch over to his side, shunting you, boss?" with a short, hard laugh.

"I hardly think I'd try that, if I stood in your shoes, Samuel," and the lawyer showed his teeth for an instant. "I always did despise a turncoat, and if—I simply say *if*, please remark, Samuel—you should yield to any such temptation as that, I really believe I would hunt up a certain irregular justice of this region and whisper in his ear— But you'll never be so foolish as to drive me to such hard measures, Samuel!"

"I don't know what you're trying to get through you, as I said once before," sullenly muttered the gambler, with a flush and sudden drooping of his lids that flatly denied his assertion. "But if you're ready to talk business, I'm your man! In one word—how much will you give to have the girl run off out of the way of your client, to be kept shady until—how long?"

"If I should say—forever?" slowly asked Haslam, keenly watching the face of the gambler, as though he trusted more to his eyes than his ears in a case of so much importance.

Sam Hill shifted a little uneasily on his seat. It was plain enough that he would have preferred a different answer.

"That's mighty rough—and she such a dainty duck of a daisy darling!" he muttered, half to himself, then adding in clearer tones: "Why wouldn't it do just to keep her shady until after this other woman—the one who is putting up the stamps, you know—has raked in the jackpot? If she once gets the young fellow tight on a string, why need she make another woman suffer so hard?"

"Do you refuse to take the contract, dear fellow?"

Sam Hill gave a surly growl, showing his teeth much after the fashion of a cornered cur who finds he must turn at bay.

"You know I can't do that, boss. That cursed hoodoo has been too much for me! If you didn't know—"

"Fortunately for my client, I do know, Samuel," laughingly interrupted the lawyer, his eyes twinkling with malicious pleasure at the vain struggles of the man whom he had selected as his tool. "The girl must move on, and I don't know any other person whom I could so surely trust as you, to set her machinery in motion, Samuel!"

"It'll cost heap more ducats, though."

"Never you borrow trouble on that score, my dear fellow," generously nodded Haslam, swelling with importance. "You do your work up in neat order, and be sure you'll never have a word of objection to the wages you'll earn thereby. The lady pays for everything, you see!"

"I'd run her off for a thousand, but if I have to—"

"Call it five, Samel, and I'll throw in a helper at that!"

The tall gambler hesitated, changing color. It was plain enough that he did not relish this last suggestion, and Haslam laughed in a sneering manner as he added:

"Did you think to play me for a sardine, Sam Hill? Do you think I couldn't see through your flimsy mask? Bah! you pot-shooting bungler! You thought you'd run off the girl and pretend to put her out of the way, only to bring her forward in hopes of making another stake!"

"So help me—"

"Then I'm a liar, and you're a terribly slandered angel, Samuel," chuckled the lawyer, resuming his smooth, purring manner of speech with bewildering celerity. "Then we'll play I never even hinted at such an awful idea. And you'll be just as wise on your side, Samuel, and thank me for taking the trouble to hunt up a suitable partner on whose shoulders you can shift the weightiest part of the job. Don't you see?"

"Of course I'll have to have some sort of help in gitting the girl out of town, for I'll not take the chances of shutting off her wind inside the burg," with sudden decision. "I wouldn't do that even at your bidding, Mr. Haslam!"

"Just so you do it, Samuel. In town or out. And just so you don't leave a sign or a hint that can point in my direction."

"I'll be mighty careful, for my own health," with a faint smile. "But this helper, boss? Have you got him down by name as yet?"

"Do you know a fellow called Mark Mason?"

Sam Hill nodded assent, his face seeming to lighten up wonderfully.

"The very fellow I had in my own mind!" he ejaculated, in pleased tones. "You surely don't mean him, pardner?"

"Don't you think he'd fill the role?"

"I couldn't ask for a better pardner in a job like this!"

"Then consider it settled. I'll send Mason to see you to-night."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BAITING THE TRAP.

"I BEG pardon, miss," lifting his hat and bowing almost humbly before the shrinking maiden, "but isn't your name Miss Tina Cramer?"

"It is, but—"

"Then I must beg of you to read this bit of a note, Miss Cramer," the young man hastily interposed, slipping a folded paper into the reluctant hand of the young lady, then bowing again as he hurriedly explained: "I beg of you not to be alarmed, or think for even an instant that I mean to insult or annoy you. Mr. Fouser—"

Tina gave a little cry at the mention of this name, glancing apprehensively at the note, irresolutely held in her gloved hand, as one might who anticipates some evil tidings.

"It may not be so bad, Miss Cramer," gravely added the curly-pated young man, still standing uncovered, though the night air was cool and bracing. "I sincerely trust it is not, but— Mr. Fouser begged me to make all haste in placing that note into your hands, and said that I was to implore haste on your part. It was a matter of life and death, the poor old gentleman declared—as well as he could for bitter weeping!"

Tina was no longer looking into the face of the speaker, whose tongue ran along glibly enough for half a dozen. She was opening the paper with trembling fingers, trying to decipher the words by the dim light sifting through a shop window hard by.

"Permit me!" murmured Mark Mason, striking a tiny wax taper, and holding it so the white rays fell fairly on the bit of paper.

"Come at once, if you would be in time! My poor boy is calling for his sister—and dying! God pity us all!"

Only those few words, written in a cramped, irregular hand, as if the fingers had been stiffened by sore grief.

Something like a sob escaped the lips of the maiden as the light of the taper went out. It was so sudden!

Only a few hours before this she had bidden Burt Fouser adieu until the morrow, and left him looking so much better, feeling so much stronger, apparently in a fair way to entirely recover from his hurts. And now—to hear that he was dying!

Her first impulse was to at once hasten to the bedside of the unfortunate whom she had learned to like, if not love, even as she might have loved an own brother. But then she hesitated, realizing how dark was the evening, and how late the hour was growing.

She had not meant to be on the street so late, but finding she required some floss to complete her work, and not wishing to lose the entire evening, she slipped on her light wraps and ran down-town to procure the needed article. It was while on her way home that she was so politely checked by Mark Mason, with his message.

"If Miss Cramer will trust me to escort her?" he softly, almost timidly suggested.

"But—what will my parents think?" murmured the girl, hardly above her breath, shivering with strong emotions.

"I can take them a note—just a line, to say where you are, and beg your parents to hasten to your side—as soon as I have seen you safely to the door, Miss Cramer," respectfully suggested Mason.

"If I could tell them—if I might go home, first!"

"Of course you can do so if you think it wisest, Miss Cramer," and his figure, lithe, graceful, neatly garbed, drew itself erect and just a touch of injured dignity came into his voice. "It may be that the delay will be immaterial; though Mr. Fouser said that he feared the poor lad would be gone before your coming, hasten though you might!"

"Poor Burt—poor brother!" chokingly murmured Tina, turning and impulsively hastening toward the building in which the hunchback was lying, apparently forgetful of Mark Mason's very existence.

But that brisk young fellow had no mind to play watchdog at a distance, and with a few rapid strides he gained her side, gently but firmly drawing her hand through his arm as he said softly:

"It will be better so, Miss Cramer. You will be less likely to attract attention than if you were alone. You can draw your veil, and then no one will recognize you—with me."

There was a neat touch of proud humility in that addition, after a barely noticeable break in his soft tones. Mark Mason was an adroit rascal, and his selection showed how good a judge

of human nature in its vilest sense, was Selby Haslam.

The end came quickly. The street was almost entirely deserted. The night was dark, for the moon had not risen, and there were clouds sailing across the heavens, though no actual storm was impending.

They were just passing a narrow, dark, dirty alley, rather less than a square from The Shades, when Mark Mason stamped his foot sharply as a signal, then flung one arm about Tina Cramer's waist, his other hand closing firmly over her lips and nostrils, the gag perfected by a silk kerchief which he had wound about his fingers and palm.

"I've got her, pard!" he muttered as a dark figure shot out of the alleyway and gained his side. "Take her feet and we'll snake her out of town just a little *too* quick!"

"Don't break her neck, man!" grated Sam Hill, as he obeyed orders so far as lifting the maiden clear of the ground was concerned.

They rapidly bore their captive into the alley, Sam Hill calling a halt when they were near the next street, shifting his grasp on the poor girl, then bidding Mason make sure the coast was clear for crossing the open and fairly-lighted space.

Mason, being really a subordinate in that evil plot, made no objections to this, readily resigning his position in favor of his partner, stealing to the edge of the walk and peering keenly up and down the street.

Fortune seemed playing into their hands, for no living person was in sight, and the prospects of passing the last point of actual peril appeared most favorable.

"All serene and open sailing, pardner," he reported, finding Sam Hill supporting the silent maiden against the fence, her face uncovered for the moment.

"You came near making her croak, first off, with your infernal gagging, man!" sharply growled the tall gambler, flashing a fiery glance at his companion in evil, as he folded a handkerchief and laid it across the face of their captive.

"I didn't mean it, pardner," with a short, reckless laugh as he added: "What matter? She's got to do the croaking act, I reckon."

"All that may be, but I'd heap rather be caught totting a live girl than a cadaver, all the same!"

"And I'd beg to be excused from either," grinned Mr. Mason, pushing back his coat-sleeves and preparing to resume his share of the burden.

"You go ahead and see that the coast is clear, pardner," curtly uttered the tall gambler, lifting the captive in his muscular arms as though he hardly felt the weight. "I'll tote the bundle for a while, anyway. Don't make a mistake, now! And don't you try to bolt for it too quick, if we should run up against a snag!"

Mark Mason made no reply to this blunt hint, probably wishing to keep on the safe side, but stole silently forward, pausing once more at the mouth of the narrow alley to reconnoiter before exposing his precious person to the dim light. There was nothing suspicious to be seen in either direction, however, and signifying as much to Hill, he ran lightly across the street, turning to note how his mate progressed as he reached the other narrow passage.

All went well. If they could have had the full ordering of matters to their own liking, they would have been puzzled to find aught for improvement.

This crossing brought them pretty near the outskirts of Quivering Asp, and from thence on they had little to fear from chance discovery. The buildings were scattered, the darkness in their favor, and with Mark Mason left free to lay out their best path and to keep an eye open for possible stragglers, it is not to be wondered at that, in a very few minutes after the actual capture, the two men and their prisoner were fairly clear of the little town.

The time occupied had been so brief that Tina Cramer had not made an effort to escape. She seemed to have swooned from fright, or else because Mark Mason, as Sam Hill had hinted, used his patent gag too persistently on mouth and nostrils. It was fortunate if he had not "shut off her breath" for good and all!

Sam Hill was on the point of growling forth something to this effect just as they reached the horses which the tall gambler had procured for their flight, when Tina shook the cloth from her face and tried to cry aloud for help!

"Cheese that racket!" fiercely grated Sam Hill, his hand dropping over her face. "Kick up a row, and I'll slit that dainty throat just as slick as though I was opening a ripe water-melon! Will you hold your hush, or must I make you?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SAM HILL GROWS REFRACTORY.

As a sharp rap sounded at the door of his office, not long before midnight, Selby Haslam hesitated a few moments before responding, though he was by no means idle during that interval.

A quick gesture told Leslie Kelso to move

lightly and quickly to the snug hiding-place which had been arranged between while waiting for just that summons. And without a sound to betray his purpose, the young man slipped from his chair into the narrow closet to the left of the desk, barely large enough to accommodate his person.

"Open up, boss!" came a sharp yet guarded voice, followed by a repetition of the rapping. "I've got to see you, and on business, too!"

Selby Haslam gave a smothered ejaculation as though just rousing from a doze, and crossed the room to unlock and open the door. The tall figure of Sam Hill was revealed, and the sleepy lawyer seemed to waken up all in a moment.

"You've done the job, Samuel?" he whispered, catching an arm and hastening the kidnapper's entrance. "Don't say you've made a botch of it, or I'll— Confound it, man!"

The lawyer spoke like one powerfully agitated, and there was but little of pretense in it all. He had expected a messenger, but not exactly this one. And yet, Sam Hill did not look like one who had entirely failed in the perilous job he had undertaken.

"Bridle your tongue, pardner," growled the tall gambler, sweeping the room with a suspicious glance, as though he had reason to guard himself against treachery. "I've done what I've done, and if you really want to call my hand, you've got to pay for it. Where's that young fellow with a pile-driver hid up his coat-sleeve?"

"I don't—"

"Play fair, boss!" with a hard smile on his florid face that told the scheming lawyer his intended dupe was growing refractory, if not still worse. "Mason didn't do what you chalked out for him."

The lawyer started back with a muttered oath, one hand seeking the revolver which he had provided against some such emergency, though he little thought how soon he would want to use it.

Sam Hill laughed mockingly, the evident fright of his patron seeming to kill all resentment for the moment. He bent over and significantly tapped the two glasses resting on the little table. At the bottom of each rested a few drops of liquor, forming plain evidence that at least two persons had recently been indulging.

"You've lip enough for half a dozen, boss, but I hardly think you take two glasses to drink out of at the same time. Turn up your trumps and I'll face mine. Or—dollar to a cent I can drive in that keyhole!" he mockingly laughed, to draw a revolver and take aim at that useful ornament on the door of the little closet.

The door swung open and Leslie Kelso stepped out, cold, hard, his black eyes glowing dangerously.

"Did you ask for me, Mr. Hill? How does your jaw feel this evening?"

"Not in the least need of another of your poultices, Kelso," the tall gambler grimly retorted, all traces of hard drink vanishing as by magic. "I hated to disturb you in your retirement, but business is business, and to-night I'm its prophet! In one word: what's the game?"

"You tell," quickly responded Kelso, before Haslam could speak.

"Suppose we face our hands, and decide after carefully comparing what each man holds? I brought along Mason's draw, to sort of even up matters, and I'll do the talking for us both. How's that?"

"Good enough for me," curtly responded Kelso. "Haslam?"

"Mind, boss," quickly uttered Hill, turning toward the lawyer, I'm not kicking against the programme as first laid out between us. All I want is to have a fair shake for my little stake. If assured of that, you'd have to hunt around a year to find a truer tool or closer mouth than this same Sam Hill!"

"Let's hear him out, anyway, Haslam," sharply uttered Kelso, taking the lead by virtue of his greater physical courage. "There's been an ugly slip-up somewhere, and we've got to understand how much has gone wrong."

It was no easy task for the startled lawyer to even assume composure, though he made a strong effort in that direction. Fortunately for all concerned, Sam Hill was prepared to talk briefly and to the point, hence little more time was cut to waste, and none was granted in which to devise and perfect a denial on the other side.

"I've got the girl, as I said I would," the tall gambler explained. "I've left her in a snug hiding-place, with Mark keeping guard over her until I can get back to tell him how the trick is to be turned. If I shouldn't get back by the time the sun shows its face—well, there'd be a mighty lively racket in Quivering Asp!"

"By the girl, you mean Miss Cramer, I suppose?" asked Kelso.

"Your old flame—the girl you were to have married, but for an unlucky love-spat—the same girl a mighty rich woman—"

Kelso frowned darkly, checking that mocking explanation with a lifted hand, and Sam Hill ceased his malicious chuckle for the moment.

"You prefer bottom facts, eh? Yet I could have sworn that Haslam was chewing gospel

and spitting out pure truth by the yard, when he first tackled me for a deal!"

"Because I thought you'd be more likely to chip in, if only to get even with the gentleman who laid you out," the lawyer said, having in a measure regained his self-control. I never thought you would come back on me like this!"

"And to make still surer of it, you run in Mark Mason to freeze me out of the game—and the world at the same time! You picked your man mighty well—for my side, Oily Gammon!"

"If he has been filling you up with lies—"

"Lies or no lies, Haslam," with sudden gravity, his florid face growing harder and more dogged. "True or false, we both figured it out that we wouldn't be much ahead of the game if we followed the line as you chalked it. You knew every card dealt us, while we hadn't even been able to steal a peep at yours. Anyway, that's what you reckoned."

"Now look here: We've got the girl safely out of town, and nobody but Mason and I can tell just how, and where she is. If you're willing to play white, and pay cash down, we'll carry the contract out to the very end. If you're dainty about spilling her blood, I'll agree to keep her in close hiding until I can coax her to marry me. If that isn't what you want, I'll slit her dainty throat, just as quick. But—and you can spell it with the biggest B in the box, mates!—But—you two gents have got to run your fingers a little ways inside the pie!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You've got to go with me to where pard holds the prize. You've got to witness just what happens to the girl. Then—after the ducats are paid and counted, you can go about the rest of your business. For then neither of you will ever dare rake up the job— See?"

"I'll agree to nothing of the sort!" angrily declared Kelso.

"Don't you be so mighty sure, pardner," and Sam Hill showed a brief line of teeth under his red mustache. "Wait until I've finished before you kick over the traces."

"You dare to threaten me, you scoundrel?"

"And go even further!" flashed the gambler, swiftly covering the rebellious young man with an ugly-looking revolver. "Simmer down and take your dose of medicine without making up such faces, won't you?"

Angry though he was, Kelso could see that the speaker meant all he said and looked, just then. He could not help himself, though he subsided with a very bad grace.

"If I don't get back by sunrise; or if I get back to report that I couldn't bring you to terms, the girl goes back home, and the full history of her kidnapping is blown to the four winds. Just what that lively and spicy bit of gossip will end in, I leave you to imagine!"

"But you're so unreasonable, dear boy!" muttered Haslam, showing how acutely he felt that threat of exposure. "Why should we—"

"Because I will it that way," with cold bluntness. "You tried to do me dirt, Haslam, but I'll not lay that up against you after you've paid a certain little assessment which Mark and I have settled on as justly due us for this added trouble. Not enough to clean your pockets out, if you've been as nimble at stealing as at lying of late days!"

"Business now, gentlemen. I'm ready to show you to where the girl is hidden. I'll swear, if you wish it, to dispose of her in any way, shape or form as may seem to you wisest and best. If you refuse to act as witnesses, then call the bargain off, and we'll do our level best to get even for our time, trouble and disappointment."

"Talk it over between you, if you like, but be in a hurry. I'll give you just five minutes in which to make up your minds."

Sam Hill drew forth a watch, noting the time, then coldly waited the result. Haslam and Kelso drew back to a corner, hurriedly consulting together, but when the gambler snapped shut his watch and declared the limit, Haslam promptly announced their decision:

"We'll go with you, Mr. Hill. And we'll be on guard against any foul play on your part!"

"Mind you don't let a gun off accidentally, when I'm not looking gentlemen," laughed the gambler, rising from his chair. "Mason's fully posted, and I reckon I can trust him a heap further than you ought to?"

There was no reply though the lawyer muttered curses bitter and deep down in his throat at the rascal who had betrayed him to this man whom he had so surely considered a purblind tool, to be broken as soon as used.

Without a word further of explanation, Sam Hill led his two sulky companions out of town, then paused where a single horse was tethered under cover, to say with a careless laugh:

"That shows what little confidence I felt in my power to make you listen to reason, gents. But then Mason thought he'd need a nag to help him take the girl back home in the morning. And—you're the oldest, Haslam; jump up, will you? Mr. Kelso would rather walk with me I'm sure."

There was no serious objection made to this arrangement. Indeed, the further they went, the more completely the two prime schemers seemed to be dominated by this fellow whom

they had counted as such an easy and pliant tool to handle!

After they were fairly out of sight of Quivering Asp, Sam Hill took on a more cheerful air, actually seeming to enjoy what was tasting more bitter than gall to his enforced companions. He assured them that the hiding-place was no great distance away, and that they could easily finish their work and return to town before the rising of the sun.

"I don't want you to take it too hard, gents," he added smoothly. "Of course I had to rub it in a little, back yonder, just to get even, but so long as I get my pay on time, I'm not one to hold a grudge. It worked me up a bit when Mason blew the gaff, but that soon passed off. It was a 'cute enough trick, and doubtless would have worked to the queen's taste, if Mark hadn't thought to ask himself how sure was he that you hadn't dug a snug little pit for his own reward?"

Haslam muttered another denial, but Sam Hill simply laughed at it. He seemed fully satisfied that he knew the whole truth, and finally the lawyer sulkily held his peace.

After a little less than a two hours' trip, Sam Hill declared that the cave in which he had left Mason in charge of the girl, was close at hand. And halting he sounded a peculiar whistle, which was promptly answered from the darkness ahead of them.

"You're not particularly anxious for the girl to see your faces before the job is jobbed?" he whispered as he hitched the horse and moved forward. "I didn't think you would, and so told Mark to douse the glim if I signaled all right! Freeze to my coat-tail, won't you?"

In silence he led the way up hill for a few paces, then warned his companions to stoop until safely past the cave entrance. Then—

Strong hands grasped and disarmed them, snapping irons on their wrists! A bright light flashed out, to show Solemn Saul sadly confronting them, staff in hand. And in hopelessly mournful accents he asked:

"You hain't nuther o' ye named Bildad Barzilla Bird, I don't reckon?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOW SOLEMN SAUL "SHELLED 'EM OUT!"

NEITHER Selby Haslam nor Leslie Kelso tried to answer that stereotyped question, for just then they had other matters to think of.

Shrinking as far as their ironed wrists and those strong grips on their shoulders would permit, they glared about them like cornered rats, but too badly frightened to even think of resistance just then.

They were in a small, irregular cave, and at first they could only distinguish the sad-faced with the shells. And even he seemed to undergo a marvelous transformation even as they stared helplessly, in fear and trembling, upon him.

That doleful melancholy faded away to be replaced by a smile of grim satisfaction. Those lack-luster eyes grew sharp and keen and penetrating. That long face seemed to broaden, and even to grow comely. More than that was impossible.

And when Solemn Saul spoke, his professional whine had melted away with his uncouth phraseology.

"You are welcome as a shower in July, gentlemen," he said, with a low bow and a light laugh. "It was rather tiresome waiting in the dark, but the end amply makes amends for all that. And—are you quite sure neither of you can honestly answer to the name of Bildad Barzilla Bird?"

Kelso made a desperate attempt to break away from his guards, and succeeded so far that they all fell to the ground together, and he was subdued only after a hot struggle. When this was accomplished, the legs of the prisoners were bound, as well, and they were seated with their backs propped up against the cold rock wall.

"The little farce is about played out, gentlemen," smoothly added Solemn Saul—for lack of a more definite title—just as though nothing out of the ordinary run had happened. "You made your moves the best you knew how, but owing to a lack of certain information, the result hardly covers you over with glory.

"In the first place, you, Selby Haslam, was too eager to get your grip on that peculiar will left behind him by Daniel Dew. You found a flaw in it, as you fondly imagined, by means of which you might succeed in breaking the will and turning over the big pile of money, less your share or commission, to Leslie Kelso, as he calls himself here; Montague Dew as he was christened in earlier days.

"If you had been more patient, you might have fared better. If you had pressed your investigations further, you might at last have discovered the whole truth of that black tragedy, and of the missing heiress. You might have avoided several other serious errors, which I may take the trouble to point out before I finish this bit of a lecture.

"And then, dear rascal," with a tantalizing smile playing about his thin lips as he gazed

upon the crestfallen schemers, "you ought to have been more prudent even after you run your game—real or fancied as the case may be—to earth in Quivering Asp. You wanted to make too good an impression among 'the boys.' And in trying to do this, you kept your usually keen, shrewd wits muddled with bad liquor. That was a crime, in one who had so much at stake, my dear rascal!"

Selby Haslam groaned as though he had long since begun to realize as much.

"Thanks to this sinful folly on your part, precious scoundrel, you trusted too much in irresponsible tools, and you picked out entirely too many of them. And to prove that I am keeping strictly inside the limit, permit me to lay bare your most important errors.

"You fancied you could play more freely if a certain gentleman was safely laid beneath the sod, as a daisy fertilizer. You looked about you and chanced on a lucky find, as you then believed. You hired Pat McCarthy to down the bridge-boss. That was error number one, counting from your arrival at Quivering Asp.

"You also permitted your vast intellect to become worse muddled over the musical mystery attached to The Shades. Number two. And as there might be luck in odd numbers, you chalked down a third by hiring the section gang to kick up a row in Pap Fouser's place."

"A lie—I never did any such thing!" panted Haslam.

"It was your disguised voice that rushed Pat and his heelers upon the gallant lad who was standing off the whole crew. Do you deny that? If so—Bully Burgess, please step forward and testify!"

The dark-browed ruffian who dealt Pap Fouser such a treacherous blow on that fated Saturday night, stepped from a shaded retreat, and glowering at the trembling, pallid wretch, plainly confessed everything. He told how Pat McCarthy told him about the plot, and promised him a double share of the gold in case he disposed of Pap Fouser. He told how Selby Haslam treated him when he called for money with which to flee the country before hot search was made for him. And then he told how, partly for revenge, partly in hopes of winning the desired amount of funds, he shot at Long Jim Anderson, only to be foiled by the runaway ponies and the brave conduct of Miss Cramer.

As he stepped back, Sam Hill promptly took his place, curtly but clearly explaining just how he had acted in the strange drama.

From the first he was urged on by a desire to get even with Leslie Kelso for striking him unawares. Only that he felt sure Haslam was lying when he spoke of that former acquaintance, the rich woman who was ready to pay such a heavy price for the removal of all obstacles to her winning the New York blood, he declared he would have sought personal satisfaction at once for that unheralded blow. But feeling sure he could not only hurt the fellow more seriously by pretending to play into his hands, but might at the same time save an innocent maiden for whom, despite his shameful conduct of Saturday evening, he held a high regard, he bided his time.

He told how he caught Bully Burgess, just after shooting Anderson, and by threats of arousing the lynchers, he gained the fellow's pledge to confess everything when the proper moment came. He also captured Mark Mason, with the aid of Solemn Saul, Jim Anderson and others, immediately after reaching the cave, and before that smooth rascal could carry out the instructions given him by Haslam. And Mason himself was ready and anxious to bear witness.

He did so, and after his retreat under guard, Solemn Saul added:

"Thanks to Mr. Hill, Miss Cramer knew just what to expect when she gave Mason a chance to perform his part. All the time she was under the eyes of her best friends, and Hill himself was sworn to promptly avenge any rude treatment or offered insult at Mason's hands. And—to cut a long story short—ladies and gentlemen, will you please step forth into the light?"

Tina and Sally Cramer at once appeared from around the abrupt bend in the rock wall, supported by gallant Jim Anderson and Josh Cramer, actually looking bold as a sheep as he scowled upon the crest-fallen schemers.

There were still others, among them Will Busby and Sam Collins, but they need no particular mention in this connection.

Solemn Saul cast aside his half-mocking air as he took the hand of Tina Cramer in his, before adding:

"I have summed up the greater of your blunders and mistakes, Selby Haslam, but now I'll admit that in your most important move you were to a certain degree in the right.

"This young lady is really the daughter of the unfortunate Theodosia Dew, wife of Digby Dew, whom, by the way, you owe an apology for carrying about with you a false representation; for the broken-down detective with whom you negotiated, sold you the photograph of an escaped thug for a perfect likeness of the vanished gentleman.

"As I started to say, Miss Tina Cramer, as she is best known in Quivering Asp, is really

Albertina Dew, and to her—in case no other heirs should likewise miraculously turn up, just when least expected—will surely descend the great fortune left behind him by Daniel Dew.

"This is hardly the disposition you two precious schemers wished to make of the money, but I really believe that she will make better use of it than either you or the so-called Leslie Kelso!"

Tina was pale and trembling from over-excitement, and Jim Anderson led her, with Sally and the valiant Josh, past the sullen prisoners and out of the cave, to hasten their return to Mother's Kitchen.

When the women had vanished, Solemn Saul turned to those remaining, and spoke hurriedly and earnestly. Then he turned again toward the two unmasked schemers, speaking coldly, mercilessly:

"I ought to carry you to a place where your crimes might be properly punished, but to do that would necessitate the coming forward of Miss Dew and her adopted parents. This they are reluctant to do, and as a consequence we have, bearing their services in mind, decided to turn you both over to the mercies of Samuel Hill, Mark Mason and Bully Burgess, to treat as they deem just and righteous. And may the master you have served so long and faithfully stand by you in this emergency!"

Grave, his face grim and hard-set, Solemn Saul gave no ear to the wild cries and frenzied pleadings of the miserable wretches, not to abandon them to such savage enemies. They had sinned. Let them suffer!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE END OF A RUINED LIFE.

"WHILE there's life, there's hope, my dear sir!"

The doctor tried to impregnate this truism with fresh vitality, but as he met that faint, almost mocking smile, he knew that he was only too flatly contradicting his own words. There was no longer any hope for this man, and none knew it better than Pap Fouser himself.

With the rapid improvement visible in Burt Fouser from the very hour in which Tina Cramer paid his bedside her first visit, his father had steadily sunk in the opposite direction. As the doctor had hinted in the beginning, his hurt was really more to be dreaded than those which the hunchback had received. His skull was seriously fractured, and the intense anxiety to which he had given full sway ever since, had well-nigh completed the work begun by that rusty coupling-pin.

"The boy—is he—" whispered Fouser, turning his sunken eyes on Solemn Saul Sunday, who stood close beside his pallet.

"Sleeping peacefully, and will remain thus until we give him the antidote," was the prompt response. "But you'd better not risk it, my dear fellow. It will surely destroy your last faint chance of pulling through. Think of poor Burt—"

"I am—it's for him!" the dying man replied, with more of fire and strength than would have been looked for in one who so plainly carried the dews of death upon his brow. "He'll be better off—and may forget the shame of—"

Solemn Saul drew the physician a little apart from the cot, speaking earnestly with him for a few minutes. Neither man seemed satisfied with the situation, but as the physician declared:

"It's only a question of a few minutes more or less, at most. He is dying, surely if slowly. I can't save him. And—if it will give him anything like ease of mind, why—"

"You stand by to brace him up with your drugs, then, and I'll look out for the rest," interrupted Saul, who evidently preferred action to discussion.

"Shall I bring them all in, Fouser?" he asked, as he bent over the dying man. "They're all below, waiting the call. I've told them enough to guard against any particular scene. They'll not excite you by asking questions and the like of that. But—even now it isn't too late to take this last chance for pulling through, Fouser!" with grave earnestness hining out of his little gray eyes.

"Call them up. I must do it. Hurry—I want to die with my eyes watching his poor, scarred face!"

With a motion bidding the physician do his best, Saul left the sick-room and ran down to the gaming-room, where he found Tina, Sally and Josh Cramer, together with Jim Anderson and a poor, dignified, professional-looking gentleman awaiting him.

"He is ready to see you now, ladies and gentlemen. Please restrain your emotion as much as possible, for he will require all his little remnant of strength to get through with his story. And you," to the professional-seeming gentleman, "take down his words as fully as possible, and have all in readiness for his signature. But do this while keeping as much out of his sight as possible. Ready, now!"

As they filed into the room, Pap Fouser was

propped up on his cot and looking far stronger than when Saul left him, thanks to the powerful drugs which the physician had administered, against his better judgment, it should be added. And, as Tina Cramer would have taken his hand, Pap Fouser almost sharply motioned her back, hoarsely crying:

"Not now—not until you know who and what I am! Then—if you can say—if you *can* forgive me, it will make death a little less hard and hopeless!"

A ghastly pallor came into his emaciated face, and only for the quick support lent by the physician he would have rolled from the supporting pillows. Nothing could have so thoroughly shown how very weak the once strong man had grown!

"It's coming now!" warningly whispered Saul, holding Tina by the hand. "Don't give a sound—don't make a move to still further shake him, for your life!"

Just in time that hasty warning, for, bracing up wonderfully, Pap Fouser began his confession without preface:

"You all know me as Pap Fouser, but that is only part of the lie I have lived for many years. My real name is Digby Dew!"

Sally Cramer turned a shade paler. Josh tried to choke down a gasp of terror, as he slipped around behind his wife. But Tina, warned by that firm grip and burning glance, forced a smile into her face as those sunken eyes ventured to pause upon it.

The dying man shivered, but seemed to gather fresh strength from that kindly look, where he had so evidently expected shrinking if not absolute horror and loathing.

He spoke rapidly, as though fearful his fictitious powers might fail him before all was told. It is hardly necessary to follow him word by word, since much of this would be old to those who have followed the thread thus far.

He told of his earlier life and training. Brought up without religion or respect for the law—his father a professional thief, his mother a confirmed drunkard—little wonder that he had gone to the bad when poverty bore hard upon him.

Yet he solemnly swore that mortal man never loved family better than he, even when he was at his worst. If he quarreled with his wife, it was only when whisky crazed his brain.

He swore that he had not meant to injure his wife, much less kill her, on that terrible night. He swore that he did no more than break away from her when she clung to him, in hopes of keeping him from going out in search of more liquid damnation. And he swore that he only recovered his senses—yet even then he was dazed and stupefied in brain—when he beheld his wife lying, with shattered skull, at his feet! As high Heaven heard him now, he could not remember having dealt her a blow sufficient to cause this!

It was long weeks before he learned of the fire and what followed. He found himself far away in another State, ignorant of how he came there. And then he slowly, painfully picked up all the facts, real and seeming, putting them together until he saw just how he was viewed by the world in general.

He was pronounced the murderer of his wife; his son was a terribly scarred inmate of a hospital; his little daughter was dead, burned to ashes in the burnt building. And then—

He motioned Saul Sunday to take up his story, while he recovered a little of the strength he had wasted.

The man with the shells told how Digby Dew disguised himself and returned to steal away his son, Albert A. Dew, then recovering his mind and bodily powers, though frightfully scarred and deformed from his burns and hurts received on that black night, before being rescued—told how Digby Dew escaped from New York and fled, changing his name as a further disguise.

"All for him—all for my poor boy!" panted the dying man. "I heard about the great fortune which by rights belonged to him, but I dared not lay claim to it, lest they hang me for murder, which I never committed, as God is my judge! never—never!"

He never knew that little Albertina, twin sister to Albert, had escaped that fire. He did not recognize her when they met in Quivering Asp, though it was not long before he began to trace in that charming face something of his dead wife's features. But, even then, he would never have learned the full truth, had not Saul Sunday opened his eyes.

There was much more said, all of which was duly recorded, and in the end signed and witnessed for future use in case of need, but Digby Dew was sinking fast, despite the drugs which the doctor liberally administered, and though there were tears in his sunken eyes as Tina came to embrace, and kiss, and call him father! It was plain that his only thoughts now were of his idolized son.

"It was my cruel work! I scarred and mangled him! And he must be told it all now! He'll hate me! He'll even—even curse—"

"No he won't, old fellow," muttered Saul, his own eyes dimmed with moisture. "He'll never know it all, if we can keep it from him. And even if he should, he can't blame you, when we

count up all you've done and sacrificed for him these many years past!"

But, Digby Dew was past hearing or heeding, now. His brain seemed failing, and he could only moan restlessly and murmur the name of his boy. And so, gently, smoothly, the men lifted his cot and bore him back to the side of his idol.

"Burt!" the dying man suddenly gasped, lifting himself on one arm and eagerly, lovingly gazing into that peacefully smiling countenance. "It was all for you! I did what I could to make amends, but—hush!" and he flashed a warning frown around the room as he sunk back on his pillows, a trembling finger touching his parched lips. "My boy is sleeping—don't wake—him—"

Why should they? Digby Dew would never more recognize him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SOLEMN SAUL NO LONGER THE SAD MAN.

DIGBY DEW lingered in that painless stupor for nearly four-and-twenty hours before death finally claimed its prey. He never recovered his consciousness, and perhaps it was just as well that such should be the case.

Burt, or Albert Dew, as he should be called from now on, mourned sincerely over him, for, as far back as his memory could stretch, his father had been so kind, so indulgent! Never had he frowned upon the lad. Never had he spoken a sharp word to him. His whole time had been devoted to making what reparation lay in his power for the drunken frenzy which led to this hideous deformity.

Perhaps the blow fell lighter than it would have done had the son not been so weak in body. And it is beyond question that Tina helped him to bear it much better than he could have done alone. Now that he knew her as his own sister, in law as in fiction, Burt gave signs of quickly altering his romantic passion to suit the altered situation.

It was not until after the burial of Digby Dew—or "Pap Fouser" as he was still esteemed by all of Quivering Asp outside of our immediate circle—that "Solemn Saul" Sunday fully explained the part he had played in the peculiar drama.

He frankly admitted that he had taken hold of the case through mere speculation, believing that it would "pay" if he could fairly get to the bottom of it.

"I had nothing better to do, just then," he said. "I was still connected with the agency, as a detective, but I had earned a long furlough by a lucky bit of work, and I had more than once had my attention called to this Dew case, as it was named. Among other things, one of the old time boys, who had ruined himself for the profession by hard drink, told me how he had made a stake out of Selby Haslam. Among other items he had sold for a handsome price a false photograph of Digby Dew."

"I learned what I could from this old soak, then followed the lawyer step by step in his investigations, marking one or two slips which he might have avoided had he been a little more patient. I found out that Montague Dew, a gay and festive young blood, was backing the law sharp, and then I knew there was both fun and ducats in the air."

He went on to show just where Selby Haslam had fallen into errors. In one case a hastily entered name on the hospital register led him to a wrong conclusion. Albert A. Dew seemed to read "Alberta Dew."

Even then, if he had not been so fearful of awakening dangerous curiosity by his investigations, he might have learned of his error in time. As it was, he jumped to a conclusion which blinded him to a fact which Solemn Saul made almost immediately after entering the town of Quivering Asp.

"I had better records to go on, you see," the detective explained. "I had a genuine photograph of Digby Dew, and, though he had changed in a most remarkable fashion, both through undying remorse and by keeping strictly sober, I had little trouble in recognizing Pap Fouser. Then, knowing that a boy had been stolen from the hospital, and that that boy had had been taken there after being hurt at a fire, it was easy enough to place Burt Fouser. But, take it all in all, my greatest shock was when I came face to face with Miss Tina, here! That knocked me all of a heap, and only for my famous staff and the little joker, I really believe I must have let something of the truth leak out!"

The detective, whose name was really Saul Sunday, explained why he had chosen to enter Quivering Asp in such a guise. While pursuing his investigations, Selby Haslam had more than once passed him by at headquarters, and the detective was not sure he would escape recognition in his natural guise.

"Then, too, as a half-cracked thimble-rigger, with a fantastic mission to perform, I knew that I could push myself into places where, in less crazy disguise, I could not go without arousing unhealthy suspicion. I reckon I managed to

make myself an abominable nuisance, but to paraphrase the saying so pleasing to our cockney cousins: what's the odds, so long as you get there?"

There was still a few obscure points, which Saul explained on request.

When he first came to Quivering Asp, following on the track of Selby Haslam and Leslie Kelso, the detective fully intended to arrest Digby Dew and take him back to New York, to answer for the murder of his wife—which crime still stood charged against him. But as he saw how changed the man was: as he noted how wholly devoted he was to his son: he resolved to wait a while before dealing his blow. Then Burt took such a strong fancy to the supposed cracked thimble-rigger, and the tragedy followed so swiftly that his hand was stayed.

Suspecting Sam Hill of playing in with the crafty lawyer, he took his chance to warn the gambler, only to be told frankly what an atrocious plot the two schemers were shaping. After that Hill made no move except under the detective's advice.

When the crisis came, Sunday ventured to tell Digby Dew the truth about Tina Cramer, which ultimately led to that death-bed confession.

The more surely to entrap the schemers, or "to shell 'em out!" as Sunday grimly put it, the abduction was arranged and all conducted as though it was genuine.

After having permitted Sam Hill and his two companions to torment the two schemers for a time, making them really believe that their fate was to be one of literal torture until death should come to relieve them, the detective, with his little body-guard, returned to the cave and sat in genuine judgment over the villains.

Their sins were briefly reviewed, and the unanimous verdict was that, after a sound flogging, they were to be turned loose, with the usual "notice to leave!"

There was no appeal from this judgment, though both Haslam and Kelso attempted it.

"You ought to bless your patron saint—who needn't be named more particularly!—that you are let off so lightly," coldly responded the detective. "If I thought those you have so shamefully plotted against could be induced to appear to bear witness against you, I would run you up against a judge, mighty quick! And I could insure you perfect retirement from the weary world for enough years to make your heads white before you come out to spin fresh webs, too!"

The sentence was duly carried out. The two schemers were stripped and flogged until the memory would never leave them while life lasted; then they were turned loose. They lingered in the hills until dark, when they crept down and stole aboard an east-bound train, never more to show their faces in Quivering Asp!

Sam Hill was duly rewarded for his services, and without delay put his "hoodoo" to the test. And he found the "streak of bad luck" was broken!

Bully Burgess did not fare so well. He was let go by the detective, as promised, if he would confess all, but a party of citizens caught him and the dastardly slayer of poor Digby Dew "went up a tree!"

Burt Fouser—the name comes so much more readily than that which he now bore!—steadily recovered from his hurts, and as the relationship was still kept secret from the outside world, and as Jim Anderson declared that he could not permit his prize to escape him, even for a flying trip East under the wing of Saul Sunday, to open proceedings for securing her fortune, the hunchback actually sung at the wedding of his once longed-for bride!

That fortune was secured, in due time, and Saul Sunday was not forgotten by the truly grateful heirs.

Jim Anderson is now a prosperous contractor, building iron bridges over the biggest of rivers, making plenty of money and still greater reputation for honest work. Will Busby and Sam Collins are "bosses" under him, and though they rarely take exercise on a "pumper," no doubt they could make just as good a record as they once did, far toward the setting sun.

At long intervals, "Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba," is wont to pay them all a visit, bringing with him his polished staff and dolefully warning them that he's got to cheat them if they try to uncover the little joker!

And what a Saul he is to them all!—beloved, petted, flattered until the Sad Man is the jolliest man from the beginning to the 'end of the road!'

THE END.

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